

# Some countries express fewer negative emotions than others: This is how people feel around the world

May 18 2023, by Chiara Castelletti and Marta Miret

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Emotions](#) are affective reactions we experience to stimuli. They can be positive, such as feeling relaxed or enjoying what you are doing (shopping or going for a walk, for example); and negative, such as being angry, sad or worried.

But are we happy, irritated or depressed in the same way in different countries and cultures? It seems that the answer is a resounding no: different levels of positive and [negative emotions](#) differ according to where we come from.

In a study involving more than 50,000 adults in Spain, Mexico, India, China, Russia, Ghana, South Africa, Finland and Poland, the [day reconstruction method](#) assessed the extent to which people felt worried, irritated or angry, rushed, depressed, tense or stressed; or calm, relaxed and enjoying themselves.

The results revealed that people in Finland, China, Ghana and South Africa express fewer negative emotions. As for [positive emotions](#), they are more homogeneous across countries, with the participants from African nations having higher values.

## **In China, emotions are considered pathogenic factors**

Culture can influence the way people showcase their emotions. For example, Chinese emotions and their expression differ from other cultures in their low frequency, intensity and duration. In fact, [there is a long history](#) of considering emotions as pathogenic, understood as factors that disturb the normal functioning of the body. This tradition consequently discourages their expression.

Finns tend to be emotionally reserved and rarely score high on the expression of joy or anger. In fact, the Finnish concept [sisu](#) means to demonstrate strength, stoicism and resilience. [Social norms in some African countries analyzed in another study \(Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe\)](#) point to negative emotions as undesirable.

Taking [social factors](#) into account is important, as promoting and

improving people's emotional well-being should be a key aspect of public social agendas.

And are these factors associated with emotions in the same way in different countries? Despite differences in the extent to which emotions are reported and the cultural, social and economic gap, we agree on many [social aspects](#). Among them, [unwanted loneliness](#) stands out, i.e., the discrepancy between the relationships a person has and the ones he or she would like to have. This is one of the greatest enemies of emotional well-being wherever we live.

## **Loneliness increases feelings of depression**

The emotion most affected by [loneliness](#) is depression, especially in European countries. Higher levels of loneliness correspond to higher levels of depression and lower levels of positive emotions. We are talking about feelings and emotions of depression: feeling depressed is not the same as suffering from depression.

Surprisingly, in only one country, Mexico, loneliness was not associated with any emotion. [Previous evidence](#) affirms that the negative consequences of loneliness in the Mexican population are mitigated by social interactions and family support. Indeed, less than 1% of participants lived alone, a possible indicator of the relevance of family ties. This indicates that the effects of loneliness vary culturally.

Social participation is associated with higher positive emotions and trust in society with lower negative emotions. [Trust](#) creates a sense of security, bringing calmness in [daily life](#) and stimulating cooperation, increasing the perception of social support. Living alone leads to greater feelings of depression, without being associated with other emotions.

Perhaps it is the subjective experience of loneliness that has the greatest

influence on people's day-to-day emotions, rather than an objective measure such as living alone, which may or may not be desired.

Human beings are naturally inclined to social relationships and social exchange. Social aspects are relevant to emotions in all countries, but the form and strength of their relationships depend on the country and culture.

Taking into account the different cultural settings, policies to promote emotional well-being should be implemented. For example, [social participation](#) could be intensified, involving people in their community through volunteering and facilitating access to leisure activities. Another interesting strategy would be to ensure social relations in all countries to avoid loneliness and isolation, as well as to increase the security of neighborhoods to foster social trust.

At the same time, it would be necessary to create an international dialogue on loneliness in order to raise awareness of the problem, identify it and reduce its impact on people's emotional well-being.

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