

# A Good Cry

**When was your last big bawl? Did you feel better or worse for it? Research reveals that weeping can boost our wellbeing or drag it down. Psychology and complementary medicine say suppression of tears causes a backflow of imbalances. So what's best, a cathartic cry or emotional control? Naturopath **Caroline Robertson** wades through the human sob story.**

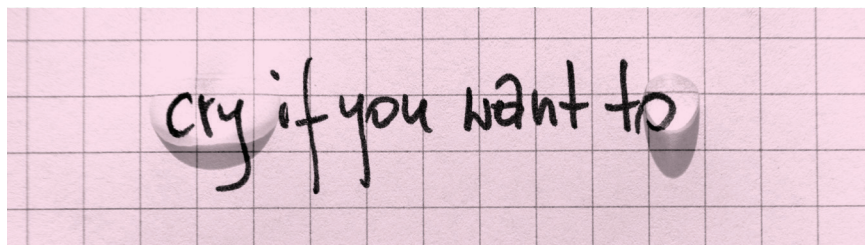
## **Taboo tears**

How often do you cry? The average person cries a sloshing 121 litres a lifetime – women about 47 times annually and men only seven times. When water wells up, are you a stoic Vulcan, a dewy blossom or a full-blown blubbing baby? It depends on our nature, circumstances and cultural conditioning. Though tears may flow for dramatic, joyful, religious or romantic purposes, here we examine tears of sadness and sympathy.

Those with the empathy gene cry more frequently according to scientists at Oregon State University and the University of California. Also, those who dwell on past pain cry more easily. Our situation makes crying socially acceptable or awkward. For example, in Ireland, crying is a compulsory show of respect at funerals, called 'keening'. In my travels, I noticed that crying varies according to culture. It's considered fine for Scots to cry when drunk, French when lovesick, Japanese when saying farewell or losing sport, and Latinos can cry at any time! Crying at work is considered career

suicide for many – as tears are especially taboo to politicians as Hillary Clinton discovered after suffering criticism for crying during her 2008 campaign. Crying can be seen as an appropriate sign of sensitivity. I recall several newsreader reports of Princess Diana's death and the firefighters involvement in 9/11 as shedding a tear. It's common to cry at work, with 40 per cent of women and nine per cent of men confessing they'd cried at work and it had no impact in terms of their overall career success, according to Anne Kreamer's Weep Profile research.





Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg says she cried at work and it helped her career by building more authentic relationships. However, when we don't want to weep at work it's best to distract ourselves, change topics or escape to a toilet cubicle before the sprinklers spray.

### Read it and weep

The belief that boys don't cry because it shows weakness is prevalent. If in childhood you were told to stop your sobs and be a big, brave boy or girl, then you're more likely to cork your crying. In a study published in the *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* journal, 150 football players judged it acceptable to tear up after a loss, but unacceptable to sob.

Men are socialised to express emotion as aggression, which is further fuelled by testosterone. They also have larger tear ducts than women, catching water like storm drains.

A study by Dr William Frey II, a University of Minnesota biochemist, showed that of the 73 per cent of times men cry, they only get misty-eyed, whereas almost every time women cry, tears streak down their cheeks. They also cry more concisely according to the German Society of Ophthalmology's study, showing men tend to cry for two to four minutes, with women crying an average of six minutes. Crying turns to sobbing for women in 65 per cent of cases,

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compared to just six per cent of men.

According to a study by Lauren Bysma (University of Florida), in 2008, women who are more anxious, extroverted and empathetic are more wired to cry. Female hormones oestrogen and prolactin stimulate tears, which explains why a UK poll of 3,000 women showed they spent an average 16 months of their lives in tears! And though this may illicit gallantry from males, it turns them off sexually, according to research conducted by the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, which found that crying women reduced arousal in men. Interestingly, as men mature, they cry more according to Dr Vingerhoets, professor of clinical psychology at Tilburg University, who conducted a project in 37 countries to compare gender's crying. Maybe men accept their emotions more as they mature. As Charles Dickens supported in *Great Expectations*, “Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before – more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle.”

### Why cry?

Humans are the only species to cry, other than grieving elephants. So, why this flow of fluid that makes mascara run and eyes puffy? If tears were solely for attention and manipulation then we wouldn't sob in solitude. ‘Attachment theory’ suggests that crying is instinctual from birth. As an infant, babies learn that crying brings comfort and builds a relationship bond. This behaviour continues to create attachments in life. Certainly, crying signals deep emotion and a call for compassion from others. Tears of hope, love and appreciation convey a moving connection. Crying alone makes us aware of feelings and can wash pain away so it doesn't spill over into everyday, uncomfortable situations.

According to Freudian theory, tears allow the release of festering feelings so we can feel clearer and calmer after a good cry. Tear expert Dr. Frey II discovered that emotional tears have health benefits because they secrete stress hormones whereas reflex tears are just water. Sobbing

also stimulates endorphin release – our body's happy hormone. It also slows our breathing and heart rate to induce a post-crying calm, stronger than sedatives. Boo-hoo benefits are boosted when we have an understanding shoulder to cry on, according to Bysma's study.

### Choked up

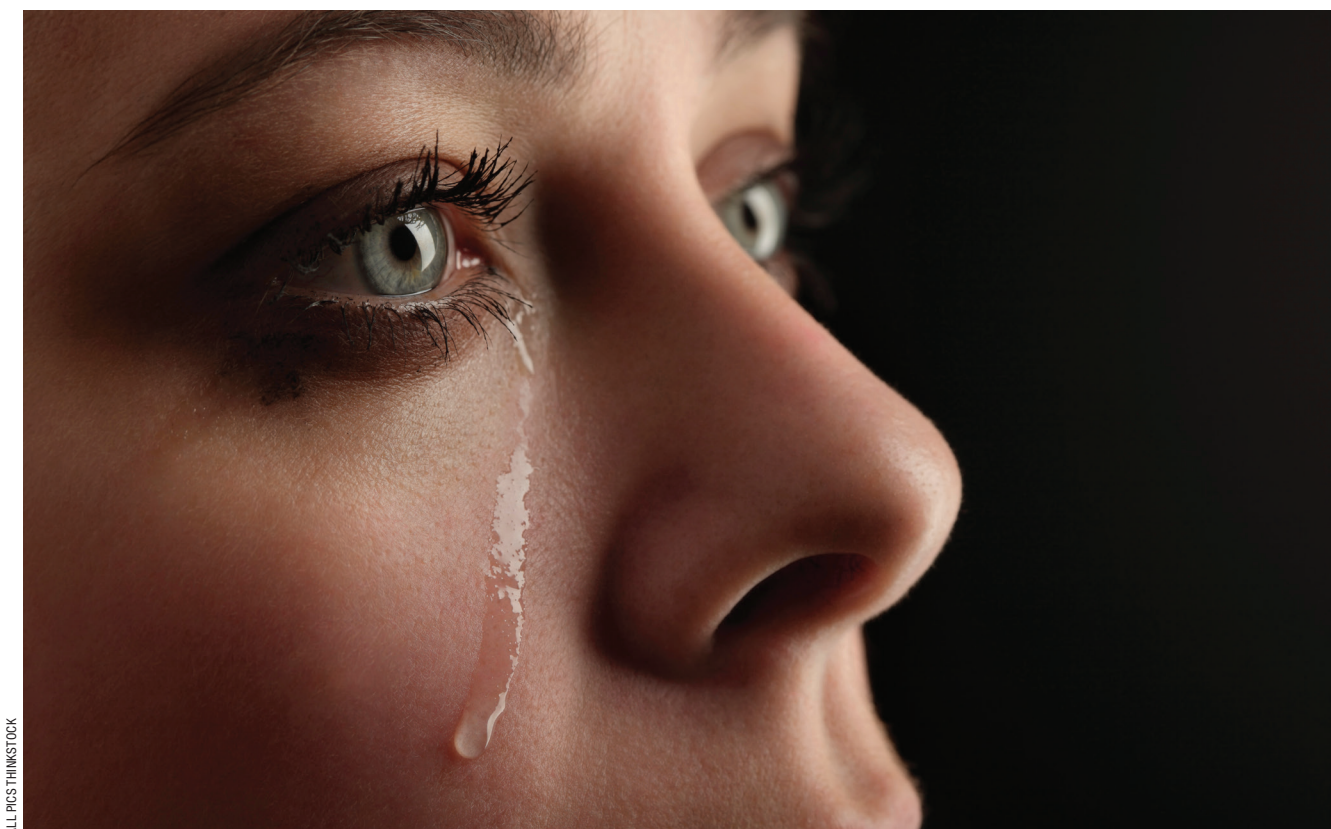
How does it feel to hold back tears? Eyes blinking away wetness, lip quivering, throat tightening, chest heaving, heart racing. It's torture. Sylvia Plath described it in *The Bell Jar* – “I could feel the tears brimming and sloshing in me like water in a glass that is unsteady and too full.” In the right environment it's a relief to release the heart's safety valve, as a crying cleanse dilutes our emotions. When sadness swells like a stagnant pool it spills over in unhealthy ways. Physically, Ayurveda says that suppressing tears causes a runny nose, sinusitis, pain and disease of the eyes, headache, blood pressure imbalances, heart attack, stiffness of the neck, loss of taste, dizziness and a sensation of choking or breathlessness. Traditional Chinese medicine says an overflow of tears start draining into the sinus, contributing to hay fever and sinusitis, and dry eye syndrome as tears aren't lubricating the eyes.

I recall a client with weeping eczema all over her arms that resisted all treatment. Only when she released stagnant sadness about a friend's death did her skin clear up. Tears literally dissolve stress as they shed excess adrenocorticotrophic – the stress hormone. “Chemicals that build up during emotional stress may be removed



### THREE TYPES OF TEARS:

- Basal tears keep our eyes lubricated and protected with antibacterial and antiviral lysozyme
- Reflex tears flush foreign bodies and irritants from our eyes
- Emotional tears wash toxins and toxic emotions from our system



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in our tears when we cry,” says Dr Frey II, “Because unalleviated stress can increase our risk for heart attack and damage certain areas of our brain, the human ability to cry has survival value.”

When we store sadness, the pent-up tension impacts on our outlook and interactions.

Suppressed expression can lead to depression, anxiety, anger, isolation, drug use, avoidance tactics and stress-related conditions such as high blood pressure, low immunity, diabetes and

arthritis, according to Judith Orloff M.D., an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles, and author of *Emotional Freedom: Liberate Yourself from Negative Emotions and Transform Your Life*. She says that exploring and expressing sadness in a supportive environment with post-crying counselling liberates this energy so we can live a more authentic life. “Crying is our natural, built-in healing system,” she says. “It can release stress and tension.”

#### **As tears go by**

Have you ever known a person with perpetually dry eyes? Some people just can't cry though they really want to. They yearn to release grief but it's stuck inside. A client felt heartless and emotionless because even news of his beloved grandmother's death didn't spring a leak from his eyes. So why can't we cry sometimes? Severe depression or anti-depressant medication can dull our emotions according to a recent review article published in the journal *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*. This is supported by Max Hamilton, creator of the depression scale in 1960, who said severely depressed patients “go beyond weeping” and are numbed into a cry-proof state. Those afflicted with

the rare disorder familial dysautonomia are born without the tear reflex, hence don't cry.

#### **Tear treatments**

When crying is a chronic or uncontrollable state, there are many paths to clear tears. Counselling allows us to explore and express our emotions in a supportive environment. Psychosomatic bodywork connects us with feelings stored in our tissues and releases them. Bach flowers give clarity and calm in times of grief, heartache, despair and frustration. Rescue Remedy dries tears from trauma, water violet from internalised grief, honeysuckle for past pain, gorse for hopeless depression, olive for exhaustion and elm for total overwhelm. Homoeopathic remedies restore balance when the apt medicine is taken. For irritable crying babies, think of chamomilla. Natrium muriaticum is for when one cries alone and craves salt. An indicator of pulsatilla is crying while craving company and comfort. For a romantic soul suffering recent heartache think of ignatia. We're more teary when tired so ensure sound sleep and minimal stress. B complex, ginseng and withania herbs can enervise us. To soothe yourself place a rose quartz over your heart, inhale love, exhale-let-go while gently smiling and slipping into serenity. **NH**