

TO CRY OR NOT TO CRY

DR. BOB BAUGHER & DR. DARCIE SIMS
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Are you a crier? Do your eyes begin to water when the Bambi movie begins? And by the time Bambi's mother dies, is there a puddle of tears at your feet? Or are you the type of person who remains dry-eyed throughout such a movie and wonders why everyone around you is boo-hooing? Or are you somewhere in between?

In our professional roles we have been with hundreds of criers and noncriers alike; and there is an important lesson we learned (drum roll please): some people cry and some don't. Amazing finding? There are two important crying questions we are often asked:

- ◆ "Why do some people cry and others don't?"
- ◆ "How do I respond to a person whose tear levels are vastly different from my own?"

Let's pay a brief visit to the world of tears.

TRIGGERS

If and when you cry, what causes those tears to well up? One way to look at this is to put triggers into the categories of your five senses.

That is, we cry because a loved one in your life is no longer with you. What are the visual triggers that bring tears? A picture, facial expressions, holiday sights? What about the auditory triggers such as music or a similar voice? Or touch such as a hug, a hand caress, a kiss? How about smells such as cologne, flowers, clothing? Or even tastes such as eating or drinking something that brings on a memory?

Sometimes these triggers take us by surprise.

Bereaved people
have a word for this;
it's called a grief
attack.

Have you had one? What was your trigger?

POWERLESSNESS

One of the interesting findings on crying is the fact that we sometimes cry because there is nothing else we can do. Think of when you learned of the death of your loved one. As the reality began to sink in, you may have experienced a feeling that, for the moment, there was nothing more to do—and you cried.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Did you know that boys and girls on average cry about the same number of times per week (about 2.0) up until age twelve, where girls begin to show increases and boys decrease?

GENETICS

There is some beginning research suggesting that female identical twins have similar crying frequencies throughout their lives. The research for males isn't so clear. So it may be that our tendency to cry or not cry may have, at least for females, a genetic predisposition.

EXPECTATIONS

Expectations have a lot to do with crying. What we expect of ourselves plays an important role in how comfortable we are with our own tear display. What we expect of others also influences how we respond to the tear flow of others. Each family, peer group, workplace and culture in general will also influence how, where and when we cry. If we believe we are expected to cry, we will either cry more easily or perhaps feel somewhat guilty if we are not crying. Expectations are a powerful influence on our comfort level with crying.

GROWING UP

We know that childhood experiences can affect crying frequency. See if these famous statements sound familiar.

- ◆ "If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about."
- ◆ "What are you crying for?"
- ◆ "You crybaby."
- ◆ "Don't cry."
- ◆ "That's enough out of you."

These words can certainly serve to inhibit tears.

But, if you've ever said them, don't worry; you're in good company. We've taken our own survey and several hundred million of us have uttered those very words.

CRYING AS A CONTAGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Have you ever cried because someone else was crying? For many people, watching a loved one cry (perhaps at a funeral or cemetery) is a trigger for tears. Some people report that, when their loved one died, the tears did not begin to flow until they began to tell other people about the death.

WHEN IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S TEARS

Now that we've examined a little of the why of tears, let's look next at suggestions for how to respond to another person's crying or not crying.

One of the world's shortest poems we've ever come across (by our favorite author, Anonymous) turns out to be a helpful suggestion for dealing with tears:

Let 'em cry until
they're dry.

This says it all. Whether you are observing a slight moisture around the lower part of the eyes or whether tears are splashing all around you, your job is to let the person cry, cry, cry without interfering.

We know it is very hard work to stand there while fluids are oozing down a person's face, but consider the alternative: What if, when the crying started, you grab the person and say, "There, there, it'll be okay."

This effectively squelches the crying process.

Don't get us wrong. Be there as the tears flow and perhaps offer a hug as the tears subside, but "let 'em cry," okay?

Although there are some who believe you should not offer a tissue to a crying person (arguing that offering a tissue is a not-so-subtle message of "stop your crying"), we believe that having tissues available is simply a matter of courtesy. It is not nice to have to use your sleeve (or have the crying person use your sleeve) to wipe the nose and eyes.

Please don't shove the box of tissues into the hands of the crier, but having tissues available is a nice thing to do (and our mothers will be proud of us for being so thoughtful and polite).

FOR THE INFREQUENT OR NOT-AT-ALL CRIERS

"Wow! What's the matter with you? Don't you care?!"

Infrequent criers or those who do not cry (in public or perhaps even in private) are often regarded as being cold, heartless, or like a cold fish (although we know of no research about fish either crying or not crying).

For those of you who fall into this category (the infrequent or non-crier, not the cold fish), we suggest that you just relax and be who you are. You have other ways of expressing your emotions; tears just don't happen to one of your most commonly chosen methods. Try not to feel obligated to join in the flow or to allow guilt to

overshadow your feelings. Crying infrequently, or not at all, is simply your style.

If you are sitting next to a non- or infrequent crier or you live with one, try not to yell at them too much or accuse them of not caring. They do care. They just show their emotions in different ways. The number of tears streaming down one's cheek should never be used to measure the amount of caring and love one feels.

TOO MUCH CRYING?

Is there such a thing as too much crying? What about the person who cries five times a day for weeks or the person who cries for two hours straight? Isn't this too much?

The only statement that we are going to make regarding "too much crying" is the following:

A person's crying behavior has become unhealthy when it begins to interfere with the person's ability to complete their activities of daily living.

That is, if a person's crying is interfering with a person's ability to go to work, complete their daily chores, and interact with others, then he or she may need help. Otherwise, there is no such thing as "too much crying."

WHAT WE WISH FOR YOU IN YOUR GRIEF JOURNEY

If you are fine with your crying status, then it is the job of those around you to respect where you are in your responses to the joys and sorrows that come your way. Others may wish that you would “show your emotions,” or “tighten up.” But you will do what you need to do when it comes to crying or not crying. Learn to accept your differences from other people and ask them to do the same. We want to cherish our differences, not use them as weapons.

In our fantasy of an ideal society, we would not have to borrow tissues, hide our tears or apologize if we don't cry. Crying would be as natural as children laughing and people singing. In our ideal society, we would begin to understand that when someone “loses it,” perhaps they are really “finding it” instead. It would be a real and honest and compassionate world. We hope we all find it soon.