

# DO MEN REALLY CRY LESS THAN WOMEN?

## Little research has been done

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You are sitting in a church watching a sad scene: The funeral of your neighbor has just ended and the family members are filing past the casket, saying their last goodbyes. As each departing person walks past your pew, you look at grimaced faces and agonized expressions. By the time the fifteenth person has passed, you begin to notice a trend:

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Most of the women but few  
of the men have tears  
streaming down their face.

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Are the men experiencing less sadness than the women? Are they holding back their tears? Or are they naturally less inclined to weep?

Relatively little research has been done on gender differences in crying behavior. One of the earliest studies by Jim Frey in 1984 asked 200 men and women to keep crying diaries for a month. Frey found that women reported more frequent crying episodes. He also found that 85% of the women and 73% of the men reported feeling better after crying (called “having a good cry.”)

However, if we look closely at these numbers, we see that the proportion of people who feel no

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better (or even worse) are 14% of women and more than 25% of males. So, the next time you begin to urge a bereaved person to have a good cry, think twice—especially if this person is male.

### WHAT IS CRYING BEHAVIOR?

In order to tackle the “who cries more” question, we need to ask some clarifying questions. First, how do we define crying behavior? Think about it. When you cry, what most often happens? Refer to the scale below and see where you most often fall:

1. Chest or throat tightens, *feeling* moved to tears, but no evidences of tears
2. Eyes moisten
3. Tears well up, but do not fall
4. Tears well up, a few fall—beginning of facial crinkling
5. Tears well up, many fall—pronounced facial crinkling
6. Tears, some sobbing
7. Tears, much sobbing
8. Tears, sobbing, wailing
9. Tears, sobbing, wailing, screaming
10. All of the above and more

By looking at crying this way, we can see that answering questions on crying, including gender differences is complicated by how we define crying. Should it only count if we see clear evidence of tears (#3-10)?

### DO MEN CRY AS OFTEN AS WOMEN?

Frey's one-month crying diary study found that 45% of the men and 6% of the women reported no emotional tears. However, this finding does not address whether men and women are differentially moved to tears (#1 in the scale above).

In an upcoming book on adult crying ([Adult Crying: A Biopsychosocial Approach](#) edited by Vingerhoets & Cornelius), researchers Marrie Bekker & Ad Vingerhoets have concluded that we presently do not know to what degree gender differences exist in the actual feeling of being moved to tears.



### HOW DO WE REALLY KNOW MEN ARE LESS LIKELY TO CRY EMOTIONAL TEARS?

The funeral example appears to provide a logical answer: In our experiences with grief and loss we observe more women than men moved to tears. However, our observations are limited because we do not know what goes on behind closed doors.

Moreover, researchers who conduct surveys on self-reported behavior know that we humans often do one thing and say we do another. It may be that men, largely because of societal attitudes toward male weeping, are reluctant to admit to researchers the true extent to which they cry. We have no idea what the dry-eyed men who walked past our pew did once they got home to the privacy of their own bedroom. It is entirely possible that they threw themselves on their bed and cried their eyes out. But we'll likely never know—even if we asked them. I am not suggesting that men shed tears as frequently as do women. What I am saying is that men may be shedding more tears than what we are led to believe.

### WHAT ELSE MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO FEWER MALE TEARS?

First, we are not comfortable seeing men cry and we let men know it. Think of how you felt when you were younger and saw your father or other male figure cry.

For many children, the sight of a strong man in their life shedding tears is disconcerting. It may indicate that this man is not as strong as we thought he was. And little boys grow up remembering how important it is to not disappoint others by crying.

A related reason is demonstrated by the language that society reserves for people who cry or for those who cry "too much." Consider how you would feel about a man who earned any of the following labels: "crybaby," "wimp," "wuss," or "wallowing in his grief."

Some people may argue that men of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have greater permission to cry. But, ask the men you know how *they* would like to be described by these labels.

Another possible reason for less frequent crying may be because, as stated earlier, some men feel no better after crying. This may be because suppressing one's crying may produce uncomfortable, even painful results.

Think of the last time you held back a cry. What did you do? The most common crying-stopping behavior is swallowing. How did it feel? For most people swallowing back tears is highly uncomfortable, especially when they are close to the breaking point.

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Therefore, many men who experience intense grief reactions are thrust into a type of crying catch-22: The more they permit themselves to get in touch with their oncoming tears, the more it will hurt to swallow them back.

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When a tragedy occurs in their life, they know that tear-shedding is not acceptable so they quickly learn to swallow and hold back. It hurts. The next time a grief-stimulating event occurs they hold back at the first hint of tear-onset.

#### ARE THERE BIOLOGICAL REASONS FOR GENDER CRYING DIFFERENCES?

As with much of crying research, little has been done in this area. A 1997 study by Horsten (cited in the adult crying book) revealed that 45% of 2,018 women answered yes to the question, "Is your crying tendency dependent on the phase of your menstrual cycle?" However, the percentages varied widely across cultures with a low of 15% in China and a high of 69% in Australia. Presently there are no studies that have clearly shown that

hormonal differences in men, such as testosterone levels, are at all related to differences in any measure of crying behavior. It may be true that men are hard-wired to shed fewer tears—we just haven't proven it yet.

#### WHAT IS A HELPFUL WAY TO RESPOND WHEN A MAN BEGINS TO CRY?

I have given a popular workshop on crying at several bereavement conferences during the past few years. In the workshop I take the participants through an important lesson on how to respond to a person who begins to cry in front of us. Here are some tips to keep in mind as you see the tears begin to flow:

At first, say and do nothing.

As the crying continues, say to yourself, "Let him (or her) cry. Do nothing to interfere with the crying process."

This is critical. Even though you may be tempted to comfort, touch, hug, hold, back-pat, hand a tissue, or say, "There, there; it's okay," it is best to let the crying person take the lead.

If the person leans in to you, certainly open your arms. However, do not try to pull the person any closer. Simply stand or sit there with them until their crying subsides.

This non-interfering response is extremely difficult for most people, especially if the crier is a man.

This step bears repeating:

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Do nothing to interfere with the crying process. Nothing.

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As the person continues to cry, say to yourself, "This is good. Let him cry as long as he wants. He won't cry forever."

When someone we care for begins to cry, we feel empathy and feel that we need to somehow fix it or show caring gestures of comfort. It is your job to wait until the crying has subsided until you say anything or offer a tissue or comfort.

If you must say anything, phrases such as, "Go ahead." "It's hard, isn't it?" or "You miss her, don't you?" could elicit even more tears.

Parents from The Compassionate Friends, a national bereaved parents' support group with more than 600 chapters across North America, taught me a great deal about grief and how to respond to it.

For example, in their meetings, when a parent begins to cry, they do not reach for a tissue (despite the discomfort of watching an adult with a running nose and a tear-streaked face) until the person is finished crying. Hard to do, but a necessary form of support.

Remember the simple phrase:

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"Let 'em cry until they're  
dry."

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Respect individual differences. Some men and women in your life will not cry as others around them are weeping and wailing. Do not judge a person's lack of tears as evidence of their degree of love, grief, strength, or character. You can't change someone's level of crying behavior.

## SELF-EVALUATION

Let's finish with some questions for you to consider:

- ◆ What are my current triggers for crying?
- ◆ What is my attitude toward my present level of crying?
- ◆ Should I be exploring ways to cry more? Less?
- ◆ Where is the best place for me to cry? The worst?
- ◆ Am I ready to handle another person's tears or lack of tears?

So, the next time you see the men file past you with dry eyes, look at them and say to yourself, "There's a lot about crying, grief, and men that we still don't know. So, who am I to judge?"