


Cry

HAVE
A
GOOD

From epic breakdowns to silent despair,  the appearance of tears was once thought to be a curious trait of nature. Now scientists are realizing that crying is quite complicated and may even help us thrive as human beings. Read on to discover why we weep—and how to feel better doing it.

WRITTEN BY Julia Edelstein | PHOTOGRAPHS BY Peter Hapak





We

know what triggers it: Kate Winslet in *Titanic*, vowing, "I'll never let go." The vet intoning, "It's time to put Whiskers down." The boss saying, "I'm very disappointed in your work lately." But why do we weep? What purpose does it serve?

It's a question that has baffled scientists for centuries. Even Charles Darwin wrote that crying may be "incidental" in his 1872 book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Part of the reason that crying remains so mysterious is that it's so difficult to monitor. Researchers can try to induce tears with sad movies and attempt to assess the brain and the heart with electrodes, but most crying arrives unannounced, unforced, and in private. How the crier feels about her tears, and what benefits she thinks she reaps from them, can be muddled (or enhanced) by the passage of time.

Still, researchers have made inroads in the last decade. Far from irrelevant, crying helps us not only to process particular situations but perhaps even to benefit from them. Homo sapiens are the only creatures on earth who cry, emotional tears and all. (Even the bonobos and the chimpanzees—apes that communicate vocally and laugh, like humans—don't shed tears.) The human capacity to cry emotionally may signify our unique ability to show compassion and empathy, says Michael Trimble, M.D., a professor emeritus of behavioral neurology at the Institute of Neurology, in London, and the author of *Why Humans Like to Cry*. Here's the truth about what your tears say about you and how they can help and heal you.

what makes us cry

Newborn infants don't cry per se. They wail, like other mammals, without tears and simply to make others aware of primitive needs: They're hungry; they're uncomfortable; they're in pain. Only as they grow to be a few weeks old do the waterworks start to accompany some cries, and perhaps not coincidentally, these cries start to occur for more familiarly human reasons: because children want to be held, because they want attention, or because they're frustrated.

Any intense emotion—whether it's overwhelming happiness or ferocious anger or devastating grief—can trigger tears at any age from then on. But as we become adults, the reasons for crying evolve, helping to reveal what moves us. "As we grow older, we are less apt to cry in pain and more apt to cry as a result of loss, separation, and powerlessness and

to experience empathetic crying," says Ad Vingerhoets, Ph.D., a psychologist at Tilburg University, in the Netherlands, and the author of the recent book *Why Only Humans Weep*. Crying is associated with important changes in how we respond to stimuli over a lifetime.

But just because tear-jerking emotions are strong doesn't mean that they're straightforward. "Tears also often tend to come when people are experiencing mixed emotions," says Tom Lutz, the author of *Crying: The Natural & Cultural History of Tears*. For instance, the relief and joy of a newly minted graduate; a spurned lover's grief, anger, and regret; the happiness and sweet sorrow of a bride's mother as she lets her daughter go. It's unclear why this is the case, says Lutz, "but certain forms of grief, such as losing a loved one, are, for some, perhaps too singular to produce weeping."

a whole-body experience

Experts don't know what goes on in the brain just before a tearful breakdown. In some cases, memories and sensory stimuli, such as a hug from your sister, may come into play. In other situations, they may not. A rush of stress hormones could simply flood our bloodstream—instantaneously and independently.

And then we cry.

A region in the brain stem called the lacrimal nucleus orders the lacrimal glands (the little tear ducts nestled in the corner of each eye) to open their floodgates, says Anne Summers, M.D., a spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology and an ophthalmologist in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

The duration of a crying session depends on the level of emotion. In a landmark 1983 study on crying published in the journal *Integrative Psychiatry*, participants reported that their tears flowed for as little as two seconds and as long as 42 minutes. (The most commonly reported length of a cry for women was one minute.) Sometimes the nose starts to drip, too. That's because the tear ducts are directly connected to the nasal cavity. In a sense, you end up "crying" out of your nose.

What happens to the rest of the body is still unclear. In a 1994 study published in the journal *Psychophysiology*, subjects who cried during a sad movie sweated slightly more than did those who retained their composure. They also experienced a decrease in skin temperature of 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit, which may be why we sometimes feel

NOT ALL TEARS ARE CREATED EQUAL

If crying may be helpful to us, why don't we always feel good after we tear up? Recent studies suggest that it depends on how we cry (really). A few factors to consider.

cry with a friend

Research shows that people are most likely to report mood improvement if they cry with one other person, with whom they're close, in the room—as opposed to by themselves or with a group. Crying in front of a loved one is a way of saying, “I completely trust you,” says Oren Hasson, Ph.D., an evolutionary biologist in Israel and the author of an *Evolutionary Psychology* paper on tears. This can significantly deepen a relationship, whether it's between a husband and wife, two friends, or two coworkers.

don't draw out your cry

“When we weep for more than a few minutes, we get worn out physically,” says Lauren Bylsma, Ph.D., a post-doctoral fellow in clinical psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and the lead author of several papers on crying. (Racking sobs really work our facial muscles.) Granted, it's hard to control the duration of a cry, but if you've regained your composure, try not to invite

another bout of sobbing by, say, searching Facebook for more pictures of your ex-boyfriend's recent wedding.

but don't hold it in

People who cry with intensity (that is, loudly or even with screaming and shaking) may be more likely to feel better than people who experience moist eyes and soft sobbing, according to a study of 1,004 crying episodes coconducted by Bylsma in 2011. “When people cry lightly, it's possible that they're trying to suppress their tears and emotions,” she says. “If your body wants to cry, let nature take its course.”

think through the tears

“In our study, we found that people felt better after their cry if they had experienced some kind of cognitive change—a new understanding about what made them cry,” says Bylsma. Journalist Anne Kreamer likens tears to the check-engine light on a dashboard. “They're an opportunity to figure out an underlying issue that might be getting in the way of productive work,” she says. “Tears shouldn't be brushed under the rug. They're nothing to be ashamed of.” When you cry, it's important to tease apart the problem and see if you can come up with a solution.

like bundling up in a sweater after a good cry. (Also at play may be a psychological desire to feel safe.)

Crying is a response to stress on the autonomic nervous system, the one responsible for involuntary behavior, such as the heart beating. When we cry, we're probably already recovering from the height of our trauma and our stress hormones are beginning to decline. “We usually experience crying as a letting go or going off duty,” says Jay Efran, Ph.D., a professor emeritus of psychology at Temple University, in Philadelphia.

the benefits of a breakdown

Why did we evolve to cry? The answer might lie, in part, in the tears. They contain special chemicals, such as nerve growth factor, that have an antidepressant and perhaps stress-reducing effect, says Robert E. Provine, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland, in Baltimore, and the author of *Curious Behavior: Yawning, Laughing, Hiccups, and Beyond*. (Interestingly, while those with mild and moderate depression tend to cry often, those with severe depression cry less than average.) Tears also communicate to others the intensity of the emotion you're feeling and, in some cases, your vulnerability. All cries, in a sense, are a cry for help or, at the very least, for some caretaking. “When we cry in public, we place a demand on the people around us. The message is ‘Pay attention to me; deal with my needs; respond to me; do what I want,’” says Lutz.

And you know what? Even though some still view crying as a weakness theoretically, most people respond to it favorably on a personal level (see *Crying Conundrums, Solved*, page 174). Nearly 70 percent of people view coworkers who display emotion at the office as more human, according to research by Anne Kreamer, a journalist and the author of *It's Always Personal: Navigating Emotion in the New Workplace*. What's more, about 41 percent of working women surveyed in 2010 said that they had cried at the office in the previous year, and that number included women at all levels of seniority. (In other words, crying doesn't seem to get in the way of moving up the corporate ladder.) In a sense, crying spurs humans to bond and band together, which was probably important for survival for our ancestors in the wild but is also helpful in the modern-day jungle.



CRYING CONUNDRUMS, SOLVED

How do I stop myself when I don't want to cry?

Try taking a short walk. If, say, you're at a meeting, excuse yourself. "Physical movements instantly change your body chemistry and can short-circuit the reaction that was starting," says journalist Anne Kreamer. Another tactic: Look away. "Focus elsewhere, away from the source of your tears. For example, contemplate the lines in your hands," says Melissa Smith, an actor and the conservatory director of the American Conservatory Theater, in San Francisco. "If you can disconnect from the source that's causing the tears for 60 seconds while continuing to breathe, you can probably stop yourself from crying." If all else fails and you know that you're going to cry, own up to it. Tell your boss or your friend, says Kreamer, "This could be an emotional conversation, but will you see me through it? No one will say no that."



no more red eyes!

Been crying but don't want everyone to know? Go to realsimple.com/tears for recovery tips.

Why do I cry over everything while my guy friends remain dry-eyed?

The discrepancy may have to do with social forces in Western cultures. Until the 19th century, crying was considered a mark of refinement for men. But with the Industrial Revolution, crying was deemed unacceptable. With hundreds of workers scrunched into tight factories, the foremen realized that they needed emotions to be as controlled as possible. Men have been holding in their tears ever since.

Kreamer's data suggest that, compared with men, women cry at work about 40 percent more often because they feel they don't have permission to get angry. "Unlike men, women worry about being labeled 'bitches,'" says Kreamer. Yet, at the same time, adrenaline is flooding the bloodstream, so the default reaction is to cry.

I cry all the time. Is there something wrong with me?

According to one study, frequent crying isn't abnormal. The average woman cries at least once a week, and the average man sheds a tear about 1.4 times a month, according to

a 1983 *Integrative Psychiatry* study. And even if you cry more than that, you're still probably OK. "People who cry often for emotional reasons are usually just more empathetic toward other people. They identify with people in a wide range of situations and may cry as a result," says Gerard Donohue, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. However, if your cries come out of the blue—not because you're depressed, but for no reason—see your doctor to find out if it's related to a rare neurological condition called pseudobulbar affect, or PBA.

What should I do when I see someone crying?

If that person is a close friend or a family member, appreciate that he or she is able to cry in your presence. Then, in a small way, let the person know that you're there for him or her, whether it's with a gentle pat on the shoulder or a short statement such as "It's all right. Let it out." Whatever you do, don't say, "Don't cry," or "What's wrong?" "People want to be in

safe surroundings but allowed to have their experience," says Jay Efran, a professor emeritus of psychology at Temple University, in Philadelphia. Later on, you can ask what brought on the tears. "But make it clear that you view the episode as a positive experience," says Efran.

If you see a colleague crying at work, try a more hands-off approach. "You could say, 'Is there anything I can do?'" suggests Kreamer. Then let the person respond. She might say, "I really appreciate that, but it's OK—I've got it," or "Do you have a few minutes? The most awful thing just happened."

How can I make myself cry when I want to but can't?

If you're looking for release, try this acting technique: "Let yourself breathe freely and deeply," says Smith. "Then think very specifically about the circumstances that are upsetting you, whether it's a breakup or a loss. Focus on concrete details. Imagine moments in the future that will be affected by this event. Remember specific experiences that you'll never get to live again." Don't just contemplate the situation as an idea; visualize the concrete details. Tears will ensue in no time.

Can you cry on command? For this story, New York City actors Jennifer Allcott (page 169), Naama Potok (page 170), Maggie Low (page 173), and Elyssa Jakim (page 175) did just that.

These pages: Hair by Paul Warren using Rene Furterer at Art Department. Makeup by Mark Edio at See Management. Wardrobe by Jennifer Smith.

WATERSHED MOMENTS

Grab a box of tissues and look back at 50 years of tears.

1963

Reserved news anchor **Walter Cronkite** pauses and pulls himself together to avoid crying on November 22, as he reports the death of President John F. Kennedy.

1972

Newspaper articles about Maine senator **Edmund Muskie**, a favored contender in the Democratic presidential primary, question whether the droplets on his face during an emotional speech were tears or snow. The episode costs him his candidacy.

1987

In the film **Broadcast News**, *Type A* producer Jane Craig (played by Holly Hunter) regularly schedules sob sessions into her packed days, at home and at the office. They become so routine, coworkers don't bat an eye.

1992

"There's no crying in baseball!" shouts Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks) to a teary female player in **A League of Their Own**. Many a professional slugger has since proved him wrong.

2003

In the wake of heartbreak, playwright Erica Barry (Diane Keaton) in **Something's Gotta Give** writes a play about her crazy love life—all the while wailing uncontrollably anywhere and everywhere (in the shower, at her laptop, on the beach...).

2008

On the presidential-campaign trail in New Hampshire, **Hillary Clinton** wells up when asked what motivates her. She goes on to win the state's Democratic primary a few days later.

2012

CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) of the TV drama **Homeland** and her über-expressive "cry face" (furrowed brow, quivering lips) spawn a viral meme and serve as fodder for Saturday Night Live.

