



When people say, “I tried not to cry,” I often wonder why.

I heard this from a buddy after he witnessed his son’s birth. He was the classic stoic male and, overall, proud of it. So, when he began weeping in the delivery room, he did his best to, as he put it, “get a grip.”

Even if you feel crying is something to avoid or be ashamed of, it has proven health benefits, both physical and mental. It is, in fact, a positive ability ingrained in our species that has, overall, contributed to our survival. Its benefits include helping to discharge emotional energy embedded in the body, releasing mood enhancing neurochemicals and, at least some of the time, supporting a return to psychological homeostasis.

Why and how we shed tears is highly variable, influenced by age, gender, life experiences and cultural expectations. People cry out of pain, loneliness, sweet sorrow, anger, love, delight, grief, awe . . . almost any human emotion can find expression in this form of release. For some, the how consists of quiet tears, while for others it manifests as weeping, sobbing or even wailing.

Clearly, in particular venues or with certain people, crying isn’t always the prudent choice. So, to tease out the nuances, I often ask people, “Who are you comfortable crying with?”

Think about it. Who do you feel sufficiently at home with that you can not only cry in their presence, but also feel comfortable doing so, or at least not embarrassed? I suspect that’s a telling indicator of trust and emotional safety.

Of course, crying is not a choice. It happens, bubbling up from the deep well of the subconscious mind, or what the neuro eggheads call the “sub-cortical brain.” I’ll stick with the term subconscious. Semantics aside, there is some wisdom in each of us that knows when we need to shed tears.

When that wiser part of one’s self brings on the emotional rain, then some choices emerge. If one is with others, the decision becomes whether to stay, display and interact, or to exit the vicinity in search of some privacy. If alone, the choice is more about how much to surrender to the feelings fueling those tears, which is, in part, a measure of how comfortable one is with one’s self.

Some of us shed tears readily, while for others, it's like squeezing water from rock. Many who found it difficult to cry when younger become much "leakier," as one of my clients put it, as they grow older.

Some who hold back their tears do so in fear of what people might think. Others have grown up in a family where crying earned ridicule or even punishment. And cultural standards also have their impact. "Big boys don't cry" is a recognized but persistent undercurrent in American culture. Former Speaker of the House John Boehner faced derision and public shaming for being quick to cry.

In fact, weeping is often a sign of strength. More often than not, it requires that we surrender to our emotions and to the moment, which is an act of trust . . . in one's heart and soul, and life itself.

Albert Camus, an existential philosopher, said, "Live to the point of tears."

Crying is part of feeling fully alive.

Let it flow.