In Defense of a Good Cry, and Other Options for 'Losing It'

June 01, 2020

As an urban anthropologist, Katrina Johnston-Zimmerman felt a duty to record her experiences in lockdown. After all, this was a once-in-a-century global pandemic. And so, for the past 49 nights or so, she has noted her mood at the end of the day.

Mostly, her moods have been fairly positive. But then, last Sunday, her local farmer's market was sold out of cut flowers — which she had wanted to brighten up her home. "It was the stupidest thing. I almost lost it there on the street," she said. Ms. Johnston-Zimmerman, an adjunct professor at Drexel University, made it home, "but then I was baking bread, and I just completely broke down. I was like, I feel so dumb for breaking down over flowers."

Of course, it wasn't about the flowers. It was about everything happening in her life — and in all our lives.

There may be real benefits to the occasional sob. Furthermore, some experts say it's OK to occasionally self-soothe with an ice cream sundae, or decompress on a gossipy Zoom call with your college besties, or indulge in a ferocious howl at the moon if that's what feels right. If you've been looking for permission to sit down and have a good cry, here it is: You have our blessing to absolutely lose it. Here are some "let it all go" options to choose from.

Cry if you want to

"Crying can be very cathartic because when you cry, you are taking deep breaths," said Lisa Feldman Barrett, professor of psychology at Northeastern University and author of "How Emotions Are Made." She added that those big gulps between sobs most likely increase activity in the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps to calm us down.

And just let those tears keep flowing. "Crying for longer time periods is related to the release of some neurochemicals that can make you feel better, like endogenous opioids," she said.

Here's the thing, though: Crying can also feel pretty bad — just think about the time you lost it in front of your boss.

There's a theory that crying evolved as a way to communicate a need for help or support, said Lauren Bylsma, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Dr. Bylsma studies crying in a lab, which turns out to be tricky. In part, this is because it is hard to cry on cue. Also, crying with a lab tech is not at all the same as crying on a friend's shoulder.

"The research that's been done so far primarily has found that whether or not someone experiences benefit" from crying "depends on the context," Dr. Bylsma explained.

In 2008 Dr. Bylsma was co-author of a paper in The Journal of Social and Clinical Psychologythat looked at about 5,000 recent crying jags. The majority of respondents said they felt better after crying. However, those who felt shame or embarrassment (perhaps because they were crying in an unsupportive environment, like an office) reported feeling worse after the fact. Those who received emotional support as they cried felt better after.

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Eat if you want to

When you're stressed, your brain needs glucose to fuel the neurons that keep you vigilant, said Amy Reichelt, a research scientist at Robarts Research Institute at Western University in London, Ontario. This is because our brains don't really know whether what we're feeling is the stress of a global pandemic or an oncoming lion we have to outrun.

Dr. Reichelt is a neuroscientist who studies the effects of nutrition on the brain, and yet even she keeps finding herself stressed and eyeballing the chocolate bars as she dodges other shoppers at the grocery store.

Beyond just satisfying our brain's glucose demands, treats actually do make you feel better. Foods high in sugar and fat activate the brain's reward system, Dr. Reichelt said. "In prehistoric times, these foods were highly valued because they were high energy, and our brains are wired for survival," she said.

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Kvetch if you want to

That urge to call your best friend when you've hit rock bottom is a good one, said Dr. Kathryn Ford, a psychotherapist based in Menlo Park, Calif. "Research shows that contact with a trusted friend diminishes our level of stress response in stressful situations," she said.

"The part of our system that signals danger doesn't really like being alone," she said. Because we evolved as a highly social species, reaching out to a friend can also help activate the same reward pathways in the brain that chocolate stimulates, Dr. Ford said.

To get the most from your Zoom sessions, scroll through your contact list until you get to someone you trust. It's not just how big your social network is that matters, it's how deep and secure a few of those friendships are, Dr. Kassinove said. You'll want a friend who will tune in completely and who will be open enough to share the hard parts of their lives, too.

While it feels good to tell another soul that you're just barely holding it together, it also feels nice to have someone disclose his or her problems to you. In part, this is because it takes trust to show vulnerabilities. But there's more to it than that.

"Being able to help someone makes you feel like you have agency again," Dr. Ford said. At this

moment, when so few of us have any agency over our situations, taking just that tiny bit of control over one small problem will feel like a win.

Avoid getting on the phone just to rage, though. Few listening partners have much of a threshold for engaging with a rant, Dr. Kassinove said. It’s fine to start the conversation by talking about something you’re frustrated with, but then move on to what’s causing the frustration, versus simply harping on what your spouse did wrong this time.

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