

Cry Me a River: The Psychology of Crying

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We've all experienced a "good cry"—whether following a breakup or just after a really stressful day, shedding some tears can often make us feel better and help us put things in perspective. But why is crying beneficial? And is there such a thing as a "bad cry"? University of South Florida psychologists Jonathan Rottenberg and Lauren M. Bylsma, along with their colleague Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets of Tilburg University describe some of their recent findings about the psychology of crying in the December issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

The psychologists analyzed the detailed accounts of more than 3000 recent crying experiences (which occurred outside of the laboratory) and found that the benefits of crying depend entirely on the what, where and when of a particular crying episode. The researchers found that the majority of respondents reported improvements in their mood following a bout of crying. However, one third of the survey participants reported no improvement in mood and a tenth felt worse after crying. The survey also revealed that criers who received social support during their crying episode were the most likely to report improvements in mood.

Research to date has not always produced a clear picture of the benefits of crying, in part because the results often seem to depend on *how* crying is studied. The authors note several challenges in accurately studying crying behavior in a laboratory setting. Volunteers who cry in a laboratory setting often do not describe their experiences as being cathartic or making them feel better. Rather, crying in a laboratory setting often results in the study participants feeling worse; this may be due to the stressful conditions of the study itself, such as being videotaped or watched by research assistants. This may produce negative emotions (such as embarrassment), which neutralize the positive benefits usually associated with crying.

However, these laboratory studies have provided interesting findings about the physical effects of crying. Criers do show calming effects such as slower breathing, but they also experience a lot of unpleasant stress and arousal, including increased heart rate and sweating. What is interesting is that bodily calming usually lasts longer than the unpleasant arousal. The calming effects may occur later and overcome the stress reaction, which would account for why people tend to remember mostly the pleasant side of crying.

Research has shown that the effects of crying also depend on *who* is shedding the tears. For example, individuals with anxiety or mood disorders are least likely to experience the positive effects of crying. In addition, the researchers report that people who lack insight into their emotional lives (a condition known as alexithymia) actually feel worse after crying. The authors suggest that for these individuals, their lack of emotional insight may prevent the kind of cognitive change required for a sad experience to be transformed into something positive.