

For your eyes only

Why crying in public remains a taboo in many societies

It's an ordinary Monday working from home when I burst into tears seemingly out of the blue. There's nothing externally wrong, but once the tears begin to flow there's no stopping them, and the next thing I know, I'm sobbing into a pillow. This isn't a one-off. In fact, it's become an almost-monthly occurrence over the past year. The timing is undoubtedly hormonal. Feelings of stress, sadness and uncertainty build up and then suddenly release, much like a pan of water that bubbles along nicely before inevitably boiling over. Afterwards, I feel better (unlike the hob). Creeping out of the house for a walk and a blast of fresh air, I avoid the two friends with whom I live, aware of my puffy face and red eyes. Why? Because while I'm happy to share most of my inner thoughts with them, I try to avoid weeping in front of anyone if possible.

That I feel better after this outpouring shouldn't be so surprising. Crying is, after all, known for its cathartic properties. Yet it carries a stigma in many western cultures, including the UK. Let's be clear here. I don't mean welling up at a wedding, shedding a few tears while watching a sad film or choking up at bad news, all of which are deemed socially acceptable. I mean full-on bawling. This is an act that many people expect, or even believe, should happen only in private. The notion of the stiff upper lip still runs deep in western culture and Britons, along with other northern Europeans, are – rightly or wrongly – regarded as closed people who display little outward emotion. There have been exceptions, notably the collective outpouring of public distress at the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997. But for many, solo sobbing is deemed inappropriate in the workplace or other visible areas. The glimpse of a tear on the face of outgoing British prime minister and Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher as she was driven away from

10 Downing Street for the last time in 1990 made headlines around the world, but the raw emotion expressed by Theresa May when she made her resignation speech from the same office of state in 2019 drew as much mirth as it did kindness.

Heather Christle, an Atlanta-based poet and writer who chose to make crying the topic of her first non-fiction work, attributes the taboo to an uncomfortableness with excess, or outpourings of, emotion. 'Crying is disruptive. Once it's happened, it makes it difficult for things to go on as before,' she says. 'If someone is truly sobbing, it makes people feel really uncomfortable.' In *The Crying Book*, Heather examines the why, when and how of this emotional expression, as well as the culture that surrounds it. She believes the unease felt by many is often linked to gender expectations. 'Crying is associated with both weakness and femininity and there are many ways in which cultures devalue femininity,' she says. A 2011 study of self-reports from more than 7,000 people in 37 countries suggested women cried on average 30 to 64 times a year in comparison to men, who did so between five and 17 times.

Britta Hochkeppel, a UK-based naturopath and energy healer who helps people process emotion, has seen time and again in her 24 years of practice how people regard letting tears flow freely as a sign of weakness. She explains: 'It stems from past generations who grew up being conditioned to believe expressing their feelings and emotions would leave them vulnerable, helpless and unable to survive.' And this attitude then becomes a self-perpetuating cycle: 'As some people struggle to connect and express their own emotions, they don't know how to react in certain situations when others express their emotions.' Britta encourages her clients to embrace crying. 'It's a cathartic process for mind and body. Any charged emotion





that has accumulated to a level of discomfort needs to be released for the human mind and body to recalibrate.'

London-based chiropractor and breathwork coach Charlie Moulton encourages her clients to cry in sessions: 'It's an important part of processing intense emotions. It can help finish a stress loop you never previously completed.' Charlie has also noticed that many feel uncomfortable with letting the tears flow. 'We get afraid of pulling ourselves down into a scary space where we don't feel good. But crying is crucial, as we must truly feel to heal.' She adds that in the west, crying is often seen as negative and something to be avoided. 'When people see someone doing it, they want to stop it, they often want to fix the problem. If a person caught me sobbing in the street, they would want to help make me better,' she says. 'But there's huge power in just holding space for someone when they feel that way.'

Crying is both important and powerful. It's one of our defining features as humans. Unlike other primates, we

have three types of tears, each with a different chemical composition: basal for lubrication, reflex for irritation and emotional in response to feelings. The latter marks us out from other animals, but all too often these tears are feared, avoided or ignored, though many cultures understand and embrace their importance (see opposite). There are signs that things are shifting. Former footballer turned TV and radio broadcaster Ian Wright was widely admired and respected for his genuine, honest and open show of emotion when discussing pivotal moments of his difficult upbringing with presenter Lauren Laverne for an episode of Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* in February last year. For me, crying will always feel more comfortable in private, but I hope we'll get to a point where bursting into tears in public is more acceptable. After all, experiencing emotion should never be wrapped up in shame.

Words: Elizabeth Bennett

ILLUSTRATIONS: SILVIA STECHER

A WORLD OF TEARS

Not all cultures find open displays of sobbing challenging. Here are a few that embrace or are beginning to encourage the practice

- For West Africans, crying, in particular wailing, is expected behaviour at funerals. The amount is believed to be reflective of the deceased's social standing, how they were viewed by the community or the love of their family. These services are big social events, with families often spending more money on them than they would, say, a wedding. Professional mourners are also sometimes hired, nearly always women. The amount charged for this service depends on the crying style selected and the size of the funeral.
- In traditional Indian weddings, the ritual of bidai (also known as doli in Sikh ceremonies) is normally accompanied by crying. This is the final stage of the function where the bride's parents bid farewell to their daughter and she officially leaves their family for their son-in-law's. As sad Bollywood music and customary folk songs are played, guests are often seen crying too.
- Japan, a country not known for embracing open or public displays of emotion, is starting to see the rise of rui-katsu or tear-seeking events. Here, people gather together for group crying sessions where the aim is catharsis and stress release. Participants are usually exposed to a variety of tear-jerking content, such as short films and poetry.
- In the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, ululation – a long, wavering, high-pitched vocal sound resembling a howl – is common practice at weddings, temple rituals and festivities. Not so dissimilar from crying, it's thought to drive out negativity. It's a collective experience normally performed by a crowd of women. The call goes out, inviting others to join in and a wall of sound builds.
- Up to the 1950s, keening, a vocal mourning ritual performed at the wake or graveside, was common practice at Irish funerals. Many argue its origins are from the Gaelic caoineadh, meaning 'crying', and the art form included wailing, rocking and clapping. Keening women attended mourning events to pay respect to the deceased and express grief on behalf of the bereaved family.