

OPINION

Have you cried during the pandemic? Here's why you should

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As a hospice volunteer of 15 years, I often witnessed the underlying beauty, elegance, wisdom and power of crying by the bedside of the dying. Unfortunately, this natural expression is commonly an unclaimed endowment for many adults at other times in life.

Counsellors suggest many women are embarrassed about crying and many men are uncomfortable talking about the taboo subject. It seems, with our default low regard for the non-rational, most of us have learned to freeze when frightened.

We reflexively laugh at something funny, and have learned to rarely, reflexively blubber at the sad and painful.

As people self-isolated on the recommendation of our best health advisers, we stared at the world on our screens. I wonder how many of us actually bewailed the cruel loss of cherished seniors from almost every country in our world? Few adults I know have sat down and cried in helpless response to the varied, painful experiences of our era. If you have, you are probably the healthy exception.

You might want to ask a dozen people in a range of ages if they have wept in misery during the past nine months. Or did our angst-filled era set them to choose boxes of chardonnay, bags of weed, bars of chocolate or binges on flicks? Are our neighbours and friends, already experiencing the trauma of isolation-fatigue, choosing to go numb as a way of navigating their anxiety?

Where did all of those repressed emotions go? Somewhere in the deep recesses of our minds and bodies, waiting for who knows what?

Everybody talks about meditation, deep breathing, yoga, mindfulness training, digital detox, sleeping well, eating well, exercising – but what about crying? Hardly a word. The underused, despair-coping strategy might be worth exploring as we remind ourselves we are feeling creatures and we can't separate ourselves from our nature.

How many of us even know how to have a profoundly good cry? Do we need to relearn to use our human emotional response mechanism – complete with engagement from our highly evolved tear ducts?

No point in wallowing in grief, but is there a midway alternative?

In a favourite passage from *Les Miserables*, Victor Hugo hints at a possible option: “There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky, that is the interior of the soul.”

We might begin by looking within – the last place North Americans generally go to find pain relief. A surgeon, a drugstore product, or even a prescription with dreadful side effects are our preferred external (and sometimes necessary) destinations. It takes guts to peek into and reference our less-travelled internal emotional landscape.

Just for fun, if you have trouble turning on the taps, consider the exercise below – three simple steps to engage your crying gear. Read 'em and weep!

1. Think of a painful or sad situation in your life. A past loss or an impending loss of someone you love? A deep hurt or fear from your youth? You might want to write the often prescribed, soothingly satisfying goodbye-letter to get you in the mood. You know, the one you never send. Or simply recall a melancholy movie-moment that made you tear up. You could put on a sad tune if that works for you. (*Wind Beneath My Wings* does it for a lot of people.)
2. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Relax.
3. Focus and try to feel a release in your throat. Give it 10 minutes or so. (Who among us could not spare 10 minutes away from our ridiculous phones?) You don't even need to know what you are crying about. Just sit there and cry.

...now, what you are crying about, just sit there and cry.

If we let the flow flow where it wants to go, our body wisdom will lead us to release the tension. That's it. Sob for a while; have a respectable and pain-releasing cry, and then get on with your day. (Note: It takes more physical effort to suppress feelings than to acknowledge them.)

Kids are onto something. Strong, fragile, normal people who pay attention to their feelings need a good cry now and then. After crying for a bit, you might feel relaxed in a way you haven't since you were a young child.

But of course there is a caveat. Allowing ourselves to cry involves a measure of steely self-acceptance – a worldwide resource in short supply.

As each of us tries to keep healthy and get on with our lives, each with our own stories and tragedies, what would happen if we were all willing to let loose? You know, privately of course; let's not go endorsing group cries. That would be weird. (They probably have workshops in the United States.)

What would happen if we truly mourned and felt sadness and pain instead of jumping to “who's right,” the ever-convenient and bitter blame-game – another country in one case, for the proliferation of a staggeringly powerful and ancient little virus?

Would a deep sobbing refresh us with a new and compassionately charged perspective?

Of course, other tears mark and make us as well – tears of joy on meeting the new baby, and my best-loved tears of all: *kanrui* tears. My favourite Japanese word has no English equivalent. “Kanrui” means to be “deeply moved to tears” – such as by a work of art.

The first time I experienced *kanrui*, many years ago, was at the Victoria Art Gallery when I witnessed the work of a visiting artist, an elderly man who was known as “a living legend” in China. When I looked at his elaborate landscape painted on a piece of ivory – the size of a grain of rice, so small I had to look through a magnifying glass – I was stopped in my tracks and my eyes filled with tears. The beauty of Qu Ru's fine art was extraordinary. *Kanrui*.

Once you get the knack, shedding tears is an invigorating and healthy physiological release.

Can we conjure a world where crying is as nonchalantly acceptable as laughing? The theory is: If we all do our part and cry enough, eventually we'll all be laughing – mental-health wise!

Crying is not just for the dying and their families; it is also a healthful expression for the living – especially through a worldwide pandemic.

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