

Psychotherapy Networker / By Jay Efran and Mitchell Greene

Why We Cry: The Fascinating Psychology of Emotional Release

Knowing how our nervous systems work can help guide what we do—and don't do—when people burst into tears.

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At the site of the 2010 Chilean mine disaster, the son of miner Florencio Avalos burst into tears when his father was brought safely to the surface. Later that month, Caylee Anthony's grandmother was shown weeping over her granddaughter's death. How can two such totally different events—one joyful, one tragic—both elicit tears?

This question puzzles many clinicians, including some who are considered experts in the field of emotional expression. The problem is that few of us have received explicit training in theories of emotion. Therefore, our notions about tears and other forms of emotional release are still partly based on “steam-kettle thinking”—the culturally pervasive but biologically absurd notion that emotions are stored quantities of energy, which, like steam, wreak havoc when bottled up too long or released too abruptly. Our everyday language is rife with steam-kettle metaphors. We talk about “blowing off steam,” being “flooded with emotion,” “boiling over” with rage, and “feeling drained” after a good cry. The Freudian theory of catharsis is basically a steam-kettle model, and so are various expressive therapies, such as psychodrama, primal scream, reevaluation counseling, and Gestalt therapy. Similarly, remnants of steam-kettle theory can be found in current approaches toward regulation, stress reduction, and anger management.

The history of the field's views on emotional release harks back to the days when skulls were trephined to release evil spirits, purgatives were administered to rid the body of toxins, and leeches were applied to purify the blood. Obviously, it's high time to root out the vestiges of these ancient practices and bring our understanding of emotional dynamics into the 21st century. Steam-kettle thinking may have intuitive appeal, but it doesn't provide an adequate guide for dealing with emotionally distressed clients. Moreover, it doesn't help us answer the question of why people cry when they're happy. Although our focus here is on tears, the theory we're about to describe also applies to other forms of emotional expression, including fits of laughter, fearful trembling, and angry outbursts.

The Two-Stage Theory of Tears

Physiologically speaking, emotional tears are elicited when a person's system shifts rapidly from sympathetic to parasympathetic activity—from a state of high tension to a period of recalibration and recovery. Depending on the circumstances, individuals typically describe such shifts as “letting go,” “going off duty,” or “giving up.” Of course, nothing is literally “released” when these biophysical changes occur, although the person's adrenaline level drops and the body relaxes.

The shift from arousal to recovery is almost always triggered by a psychologically meaningful event, such as when lost children finally spot their parents and realize that they're safe. Typically,

children don't cry when they first realize that their parents are gone; instead, they become hypervigilant and start searching for their missing caretakers. It's only when the parents reappear—perhaps rounding the corner of the supermarket aisle—that their child “goes off duty,” and tears begin to flow. In other words, tears are elicited during the second, parasympathetic, phase of the two-stage cycle we're describing. Again, the child usually remains dry-eyed during the initial, problem-solving phase. Evidence for this two-stage cycle has been found in multiple studies. Using physiological measures, such as heart rate, researchers documented the “handoff” from the initial fight-or-flight stage to the parasympathetic recovery stage, in which tears occur.