

# Five *on* Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

## Why Cry?

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*It happened last week. I was doing just fine and then I had a very difficult conversation. First my voice cracked, then the tears started. Not one of those big, snotty cries laced with gasps for breath, but there were plenty of soggy tissues coupled with those telltale red rings around my eyes.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*Why was I crying and what benefits might it bring? What do we know about those drops of salt water that roll down our cheeks?*

**1. Crying is a uniquely human expression of emotion.** Crying defined as the tearful sobbing from emotion - be it from sadness, anger or joy - is exclusively human. Other primates cry if we define crying more broadly as a means of communicating distress. The screeching of chimpanzees when they are separated from their mothers or the whimpering of ape infants being weaned could count as crying in the sense that they are forms of communicating distress. But that fountain of tears that defines the human experience of crying is uniquely ours.

**2. Crying is cathartic.** Consider these words of the Roman poet, Ovid: *"It is a relief to weep; grief is satisfied and carried off by tears."* The vast majority of the world agrees according to an international study on crying that included respondents from 37 countries. More than 70% of people report that crying generally helps them to feel better. No wonder every good therapist has a box of tissues at the ready.

**3. Women cry more than men.** Around the world, [women report crying somewhere](#)

[between 30 and 64 times a year, while men only report crying 6 to 17 times per year.](#) On average, that means women are crying about weekly, compared to men who are crying less than monthly. What's that about? Some of it may be how we are socialized; many young boys are taught that it's not "okay" for them to show their feelings. Hormones might be a factor as well: higher levels of testosterone may inhibit men from crying, whereas higher prolactin levels may promote it. Prolactin levels are especially high during pregnancy - how I remember getting all choked up browsing the Hallmark cards at CVS during those precious months of pregnancy!

**4. Do not repress!** The 19th century British psychiatrist, Sir Henry Maudsley, cautioned that "*Sorrows which find no vent in tears may soon make other organs weep.*" The idea that unexpressed emotions, including the inhibition of crying, may result in physical disease was at the crux of [Sigmund Freud's work](#) in the first part of the 20th century. Crying is associated with an increase in parasympathetic nervous system activity, which reflects or even stimulates relaxation and recovery processes. And think about this: crying stimulates the release of substances like [oxytocin](#) and [nerve growth factor](#), which may significantly effect mood and anxiety.

**5. Crying may take us back to our origins.** Neoteny is this cool area of developmental biology that traces how anatomical and behavioral features from our earliest stages of development are retained into adulthood. Crying may be chief among those behaviors. Babies cry in times of need, and we learn from an early age that tearing up, together with vocalizations of distress, greatly increases our chances of survival. This was tragically illustrated years ago when the dire state of affairs of the Romanian orphanages was uncovered. [One of the sad truths was that the babies who cried were among those who survived.](#)

*So, earlier this week I had a good cry. Beyond the soggy tissues and red rings around my eyes, it was cathartic, it communicated my distress and helped me feel better. Maybe it even helped me survive the moment...*