

Crying and Being a Man

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Jerry Novack doesn't like to cry, or more accurately, to be seen crying. He thinks that causes a problem.

I just lit a candle like I do every year. And I said a prayer, both in English and Hebrew, like I do every year. And I wept ... like I do every year. Not cried, wept. Tears streamed, my body shook, my nose ran, and I sobbed. In my 37 years on this planet, that was the 30th candle, the 30th prayer, and the 30th time I've wept afterward. Tonight marks the 30th anniversary of my mother's death. I was seven when she died. I don't even really remember her – just a few hazy, incomplete memories, but still I ache from a palpable void in my being created by her absence.



This all seems fairly normal; it is what Jewish people do to commemorate a loved one's passing, it is my reaction to my own crying that troubles me. I hate the crying, even though I like to consider myself a modern, enlightened man. I study gender and am aware of the extremely limiting messages that boys receive as they grow and develop: "Boys don't cry;" "Don't be a sissy;" "Real men are tough;" and so on. I even recall being praised by male relatives at my mother's funeral because I didn't cry. The irony is that I think my seven-year-old failure to cry had more to do with shock and lack of understanding than it did with adherence to traditional masculine norms.

I do believe, in earnest, that men ought to cry when remembering their deceased loved ones. I believe that men should cry with joy at the birth of their children, with relief when they touch down on American soil after returning from war, with fear when their partner is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, and with gratitude when that partner is given a clean bill of health. Crying should be acceptable, perhaps not in the

boardroom or on the golf course, but certainly at the end of Rudy. I also believe that men ought to laugh, embrace, dance, sing, and love. We can feel a full spectrum of human emotions. In the appropriate environments, we should be free to express the full range of human emotions.

Yet I experience such shame when I cry. First, I try to resist the tears, and generally manage to hold them back for a few moments. Inevitably, as soon as I get involved in something and forget to fight them back, the tears start to flow of their own volition. Powerless against them, I cover my face and try to minimize my sniffing so my wife won't hear me and know that I am crying, despite the fact that I just recited the mourner's prayer for my mother who died at age 34. Also inevitably, my wife realizes that I am crying and comes to comfort me, which initiates an almost overwhelming internal sense of panic, as well as more crying, face-covering and turning away. She tries to comfort me. She puts her arms around me. She tells me that she would take my pain away and bear it herself, if it were possible. Even if she could, I wouldn't want her to.

It's my sadness. I've come by it honestly, and despite my trouble crying freely, I do believe that experiencing that sadness enriches my life as much as experiencing joy does. She even cries from the pain of seeing me hurt, though not with the same shame that I display. I am a lucky man. She is wonderful. In the moment, though, I am unable to appreciate how lucky I am because I am narcissistically obsessed with my own embarrassment. Instead of holding her and silently sharing my moment of sadness, loneliness and pain with my life partner in an authentic, emotional moment, I try to reassure her that I am fine, that I don't need anything (from a glass of water to a conversation), and that it will all pass in a minute. The truth is that the tears do pass, but the sadness and emptiness do not.



I don't like to cry, or more accurately, to be seen crying. I think that causes a problem. When I commemorate my mother's death, tears legitimately express how I feel. They are real, honest, and authentic. By withholding them and not sharing them with the people I love, I keep those people at a certain distance. They can never know me completely and honestly, and thus our relationship to each other is inherently limited. So, men of the world, I pose this question: Which is more "manly," to hide who you are, running from your emotions in order to conform to some archaic rule about what it means to be "a man" without ever questioning it, or to be who you are, true in the moment, and if it means tears, then damn it, it means tears?

I know which sounds more manly to me. I just don't know why I struggle so hard to live up to my choice. The research is clear: softening the rigidity of what it means to be a man promises to enrich our relationships, benefit our health, and free our children from the social bondage with which we wrest. Then I remember one other thing: Life is short. Whether you live to 34 like my mother, or 134 like a Siberian monk, there is not enough time for any of it to be wasted. Experience it all: good, bad, happy and sad. Laugh, love, and yes, even cry a bit. It's good for you.