



# Do Men Really Cry Less Than Women?

by Robert Baugher, PhD

You are sitting in a church watching a sad scene: The funeral of your neighbor has just ended and the family members are filing past the casket, saying their last goodbyes. As each departing person walks past your pew, you look at grimaced faces and agonized expressions. By the time the 15th person has passed, you begin to notice a trend: most of the women, but few of the men, have tears streaming down their face.

What's going on here? Are the men experiencing less sadness than the women? Are they holding back their tears? Or are they naturally less inclined to weep? Believe it or not, relatively little research has been done on gender differences in crying behavior.

One of the earliest studies by Jim Frey in 1984 asked 200 men and women to keep crying diaries for a month. Frey found that women reported more frequent crying episodes. He also found that 85 percent of the women and 73 percent of the men reported feeling better after crying (called "having a good cry"). However, if we look closely at these numbers, we see that the proportion of people who feel no better (or even worse) are one seventh of women and more than one quarter of males.

So, the next time you begin to urge a bereaved person to have a "good cry," think twice, especially if this person is male.

## What is crying behavior?

In order to tackle the "who cries more" question, we need to ask some clarifying questions.

First, how do we define "crying behavior?" Think about it. When you cry, what most often happens? Refer to the scale below and see where you most often fall.

1. Chest or throat tightens, feeling moved to tears, but no evidence of tears.
2. Eyes moisten.
3. Tears well up, but do not fall.
4. Tears well up, a few fall – beginning of facial crinkling.
5. Tears well up, many fall – pronounced facial crinkling.
6. Tears, some sobbing.
7. Tears, much sobbing.
8. Tears, sobbing, wailing.
9. Tears, sobbing, wailing, screaming.
10. All of the above and more.

By looking at crying this way, we can see that answering questions on crying, including gender differences is complicated by how we define crying. Should it only count if we see clear evidence of tears (No. 3-10)?

### **Do men cry as often as women?**

Frey's one month crying diary study found that 45 percent of the men and 6 percent of the women reported no emotional tears. However, this finding does not address whether men and women are differentially moved to tears. (No. 1 in the scale above).

### **How do we really know men are less likely to cry emotional tears?**

The funeral example appears to provide a logical answer: In our experiences with grief and loss, we observe more women than men moved to tears. However, our observations are limited because we do not know what goes on behind closed doors. Moreover, researchers who conduct surveys on self-reported behavior know that we humans often do one thing and say we do another.

It may be that men, largely because of societal attitudes toward male weeping, are reluctant to admit to researchers the true extent to which they cry. We have no idea what the dry-eyed men who walked past our pew did once they got home to the privacy of their own bedroom. It is entirely possible that they threw themselves on their bed and cried their eyes out.

### **What else might contribute to fewer male tears?**

First, we are not comfortable seeing men cry, and we let men know it. Think of how you felt when you were younger and saw your father or other male cry. For many children, the sight of a strong man in their life shedding tears is disconcerting. It may indicate that this man is not as strong as we thought he was. And little boys grow up remembering how important it is to not disappoint others by crying. When they do cry, they are often labeled "cry baby," "wimp," "wuss" or "wallowing in his grief."

### **Are there biological reasons for gender crying differences?**

As with much of crying research, little has been done in this area. A 1997 study by Horsten (cited in the adult crying book) revealed that 45 percent of 2,018 women answered yes to the question, "Is your crying tendency dependent on the phase of your menstrual cycle?"

However, the percentages varied widely across cultures with a low of 15 percent in China and a high of 69 percent in Australia. Presently there are no studies that have clearly shown that hormonal differences in men, such as testosterone levels, are at all related to differences in any measure of crying behavior. It may be true that men are hardwired to shed fewer tears – we just haven't proven it yet.

Reprinted with permission from the Spring 2009 e-newsletter:  
Wings: A Grief Education Ministry Honoring the Past and Rebuilding the Future.