

FEELING **good**

Crying is a uniquely human experience: We're the only species that produces tears in response to emotions.

A CRY FOR HELP

We've come a long way from thinking that tears are just for kids. But there are times when waterworks might signify a deeper problem.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN



LET'S FACE IT: From climate change to political strife, we have a lot to get worked up about these days. And as our culture has become more attuned to emotional well-being, we're learning to not only tolerate tears but also embrace them as a healthy way to let it all out. Scientists, however, haven't yet uncovered any biological reason to explain why crying might help us. It's been proposed that tears contain stress hormones and other toxins—making them a liquid release for sadness, anger, or anxiety. But studies have failed to prove that

theory. A true benefit of crying, according to Jonathan Rottenberg, PhD, director of the Mood and Emotion Laboratory at the University of South Florida, is that it's a social SOS: "Crying often brings somebody to your side to help you figure out what's going on in your life." In fact, tears may very well be evidence of our physiology's innate intelligence, a subconsciously driven plea for support when we're unable to articulate what's upsetting us.

The very act of crying can be soothing. In a 2019 study published

in *Emotion*, 197 women were shown either a 17-minute video intended to make them feel sad or a neutral video not meant to elicit any emotion. Researchers found that the heart rate of the criers tended to drop just before the tears began to flow and then return to baseline. “This suggests that crying may help people calm down and regain control of their feelings,” says study coauthor Leah Sharman of the University of Queensland in Australia.

But not every cry is a good one. In certain cases, tears can even be a sign of a mental health issue. We talked to experts about the kinds of crying that could be cause for concern.

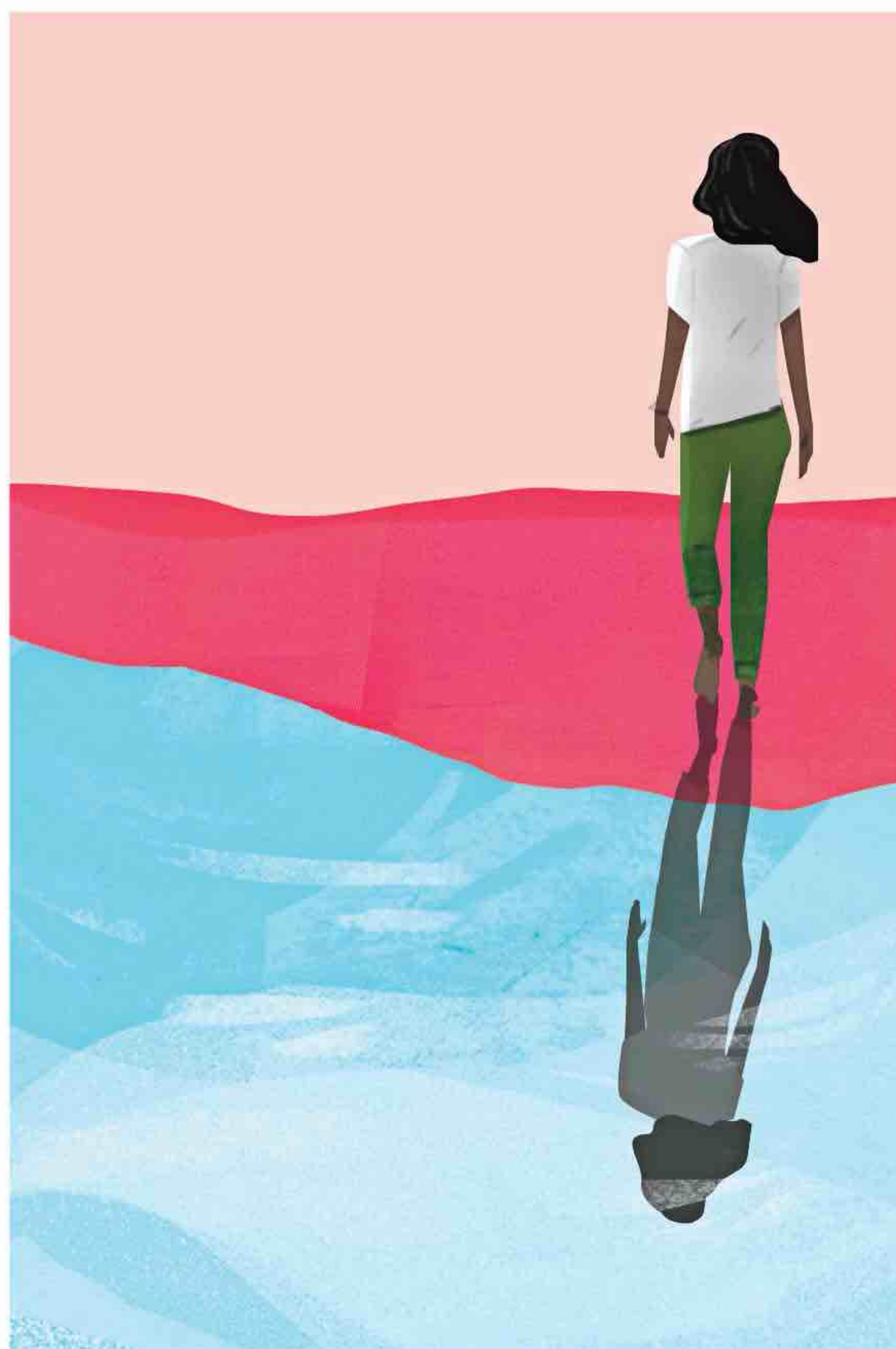
CRYING ALONE

When Rottenberg and his colleagues asked women to keep a crying and mood diary over two menstrual cycles, they found that, as expected, crying was associated with mood improvement primarily when done in the presence of another person. Crying alone might even make you feel worse. Says Denver psychotherapist Tina Gilbertson, author of *Constructive Wallowing: How to Beat Bad Feelings by Letting Yourself Have Them*, “If you’re crying while thinking *I’m a loser* or *Nobody wants to be with me*, you’re basically kicking yourself when you’re already down.”

CRY SMARTER: Try to name the feeling behind your tears—whether it’s regret, humiliation, loneliness, or longing—without judging it. Doing this can lessen the emotional intensity in such a marked way that it shows up on brain scans as a dampening of activity in the amygdala, the control center for fear and anxiety, says Matthew D. Liberman, director of the UCLA Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory. Then pretend you’re a lawyer defending your feelings: “Of course I’m sad my daughter left for college—I’m going to miss her!” or “My budgeting mistake will put us in a bad financial situation. It’s okay for me to be upset before I look for a solution.” In this way, Gilbertson says, “you’re being your own supportive friend.”

EXCESSIVE WEEPING

If tears seem to be falling more often than usual, aren’t helping you feel better, are accompanied by malaise that lasts for weeks or longer, and are interfering with your work or relationships, you may have a mood disorder. Frequent crying along with a



Grab a Hankie

Ever wonder why your nose runs like a faucet when you break down? It’s because you’re producing so many tears that some drain out of your nostrils instead of your eyes.

loss of interest in most activities nearly every day for two weeks; feelings of sadness or hopelessness; and changes in sleep, energy, appetite, focus, or sex drive may suggest moderate to severe depression. “People with depression, anxiety, or other mood disorders don’t seem to get the same benefits from crying,” says Rottenberg. Depressed criers may be more socially isolated, so their emoting is less successful at recruiting others to help. (Conversely, some individuals with very severe depression report they’ve lost the ability to let their feelings flow.)

CRY SMARTER: Enlist the aid of a psychologist, psychiatrist, or licensed social worker specializing in depression. She may suggest talk therapy, physical exercise, stress reduction techniques, medication, or a combination of approaches.

THE POSTCOITAL BLUES

Crying after sex can be a lovely thing, almost like an emotional climax. “It’s common for a woman to tell me she cried because she had an incredible experience and felt so connected to her partner,” says Holly Richmond, PhD, a certified sex therapist with offices in Southern California, New York, and Portland,

Oregon. Tears can also be fueled by orgasm—specifically, the resulting spikes in the neurotransmitter dopamine as well as oxytocin, the “cuddle hormone.” Weeping out of sadness, however, may signify postcoital dysphoria (PCD), an unsettling condition that “can involve tearfulness or even all-out sobbing,” says Richmond. A 2015 study found that 46 percent of women have experienced PCD at least once.

CRY SMARTER: If you’re suffering from PCD, a mental health provider can help you figure out whether the problem has to do with your relationship, your life, or a past experience of sexual assault. To deal with trauma-related PCD in the moment, Richmond suggests mentally repeating a mantra to ground yourself in the present—*That was then; this is now*—and finding a therapist who works with survivors of sexual abuse and assault.

STUNTED SOBS

When University of Rochester and Columbia University researchers followed 729 people for 12 years, they discovered that those who consistently suppressed emotion were at greater risk for dying early. While this may be the result of unhealthy coping strategies (like smoking or alcohol misuse), it’s also feasible that holding in negative emotions can lead to an overproduction of stress hormones like cortisol, which, “over time, can lead to wear and tear on the cardiovascular and immune systems,” says study coauthor Ben Chapman, PhD. Gilbertson adds that habitually trying to avoid negative emotions increases your risk for depression and anxiety. You may assume you’re just “not a crier,” but if you stay stoic and dry-eyed even in the face of serious tragedy, like a devastating divorce or the death of a loved one, something else is likely going on.

CRY SMARTER: If you were raised in a household where waterworks were frowned upon, you worry about being judged, or you fear your tears for another reason, a therapist can help you emote more productively. You may also find a shoulder to lean (if not cry) on in a grief or bereavement support group. Says Gilbertson, “In a group you’ll find people who are comfortable with tears and who move toward you, not away, when you eventually open up.”