

Oh no, she's off again...

As emotional intelligence continues to become more valuable in the workplace, *Stylist* asks if it's time to take a revised view on office based weeping

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It's 6pm. You're about to leave the office for post-work drinks but you decide to quickly visit the ladies' to sort out your make-up. As you neaten your lipstick with budget paper towels, you hear a strange sound coming from the stall next to you. It's an animal-esque snuffling of sorts, followed by a series of shallow sobs and the unmistakable trombone of someone blowing their nose. Panicked, you hurriedly wash your hands and try to bolt, but not before your boss emerges from her cubicle, bleary-eyed. She's been crying, of course, and she acknowledges your presence with the same sort of alarm one would normally reserve for finding a black widow spider clinging to the bananas in your fruit bowl.

It is always going to be an uncomfortable moment, but why? The shedding tears is after

all, a natural process – it makes us human. Anthropologically, communities have always come together to cry at times of war, when praying, or celebrating (there are even Amazonian tribes, such as the Kayapo, in which members cry as a means of greeting one another). But there is one situation in which crying remains completely and utterly

“SUCCUMBING TO TEARS AT WORK IS AKIN TO WHIPPING OFF YOUR SHIRT AND PARADING NAKED AROUND THE WATER-COOLER”

taboo: the workplace.

Yet, the topic of whether workers should or shouldn't express extreme emotions in the office refuses to go away. And it's hotly debated – be it by female business leaders discussing the subject on *The Huffington Post* or comment pieces from *The Boston Globe* on American health executive Jean

Yang who publicly wept at a board meeting earlier this year. There remains a dark fascination with work-crying, even though we know emotional connection at work brings great rewards (US psychologist Daniel Goleman's research has shown that it's nearly always high levels of emotional intelligence that separates outstanding leaders

from average leaders).

Historically, of course, emotive behaviour has received a bad rap. An exhausted Hillary Clinton received a pummelling after welling up during a victory speech on the campaign trail in 2008, while Margaret Thatcher, who once preached that “to wear your heart on your sleeve isn't a very good plan; you should wear it

inside, where it functions best”, caused jaws to drop when she departed glassy-eyed from Downing Street in 1990. And although some high-powered women, including Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, have recently spoken proudly about doing it on a regular basis (Sandberg was fleetingly hailed as a “new modern feminist” for doing so), succumbing to tears in a fraught board meeting or a clash with a client remains pretty much akin to whipping off your shirt and parading naked around the water-cooler. More damaging than that, it can also see you branded neurotic, over-sensitive, weak, or even manipulative.

Of course, this is an outrageously outdated concept, yet it is a sentiment echoed in offices throughout the country. While researching this piece, I probed professional women to see just how ingrained this thinking was, and I was



WHY USE TISSUES WHEN YOU CAN USE YOUR OFFICE PHONE?

shocked by the resolute anti-crying responses I got. "I've made a rule that when it's work-related, it's a no-go," said a 30-year-old solicitor friend. "Crying at a YouTube video, sure; crying because your boss critiqued something you worked on, NEVER." Another, a 28-year-old financial communications manager, added, "I would avoid public crying at work at all costs – it increases perceptions that women are overly emotional, can't take criticism or can't hack the tough pace of working life."

But does it *have* to be this way? Should we really be expected to mask our true emotions, shuffling through work with a stiff upper lip and a fear of showing our 'ugly crying face'? Or can giving in to a little emotion be *positive* for our careers?

IN OUR NATURE

First is to look at why we would need to cry at work. Although crying of sorts has long been documented in apes, elephants and even camels, scientists are adamant only humans produce emotional tears. Not only are these shed at times of distress, but adults also cry if something moves them, evokes empathy, or appeals to their sense of sentimentality (a child won't cry when they hear about someone losing their life to save another, for example, but an adult might).

And while biologists have long debated the original purpose of lacrimation (explanations range from the aquatic ape theory – the idea that tears were an adaptation to saltwater living – to the theory that by blurring our vision, tears may have served as a 'white flag' to aggressors), the general consensus is that they function as some sort of distress signal.

According to clinical psychologist Dr Ad Vingerhoets, a leading expert on crying and author of *Why Only Humans Weep*, tears have always been a call for help. "When we're born, we are helpless and it's important to stay in touch with our mother and caregivers, so we call for help," he says. "This function continues into adulthood and then expands to do things like promote empathy or encourage

TO CRY OR NOT TO CRY

Two women share their opposing views on whether it's a good idea to shed tears in the workplace or not

EMILY GARNHAM, 28, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF RHIZOME PR



"As a rule, I never cry at work. Maybe my upper lip is a bit stiff but I think waterworks are a massive hindrance if you want to appear in control.

That doesn't mean to say I'm a robot. I fully appreciate that however much you want to draw the line between your professional and personal life, it's not always easy to suppress your emotions.

In the past few years I've spoken to certain colleagues about things I've been going through and even cried a few times at work – my team just didn't know about it.

I would certainly never judge an employee for crying in front of me. That's happened before, too, and I'd really rather know if something was upsetting them, so I can make sure we accommodate that. But as a manager, the same rules don't apply. You have to at least appear to be in control when you are in that position of responsibility."

SAMANTHA STOKES, 27, THEATRE MANAGER



"I cry all the time at work, mostly through anger and frustration. I will cry if I'm told something I strongly disagree with, if anyone tells me off, or if major

changes are put in place that disrupt me.

I think it probably is a little unprofessional at times – especially as you probably say things you wouldn't if you weren't upset – but the main point is that it's very natural. Some people can't help it and employers have to make allowances for that.

Sharing your authentic emotions can help bring you

closer to your colleagues and also means issues that would otherwise go ignored are brought to the fore. It prompts people to make changes and solve problems.

As long as you're professional with customers and clients then it's absolutely fine to have a good cry if it's going to help you do your job better in the long run, whether you're a man or a woman."

social bonding, but its primary function remains the same."

Sorrow or sadness isn't the primary emotion behind our tears – especially in a professional environment. "Women cry at work for all the same reasons they cry in other settings: major life events, bereavement, relationship breakdowns," says Gail Kinman, a professor of occupational health psychology at the University of Bedfordshire, who has conducted extensive research into crying at work. "But

"THE MAIN TRIGGER FOR TEARS AT WORK IS POWERLESSNESS. WHEN WE ARE OVERWHELMED WITH FRUSTRATION"

the biggest issue I came across in my research was frustration."

In short, the main trigger for tears in the workplace is a type of powerlessness. When we are overwhelmed with frustration or an insurmountable volume of information to digest and act upon, we can have trouble processing that flood of feelings; tears provide a natural release. A far healthier response, perhaps, than becoming a ticking time bomb.

GENDER SPLIT

Not only are women culturally expected to cry more than men – who are taught to tighten the cap on the waterworks from childhood – women are

biologically predisposed to cry more, too. A study by the German Society of Ophthalmology found that women shed tears more frequently and for longer periods than their male counterparts (statistics suggest that women cry an average of 47 times a year, and men just seven). Physiology plays a part, too. Not only do we have 60% higher levels of the prolactin hormone, which encourages tear production, women's tear ducts are also smaller than men's. So while

both sexes may well up at the sight of a starving baby elephant on a David Attenborough show, men are physically less likely to show it, as the tears don't overflow their ducts.

It seems unnatural therefore *not* to give over to our emotions in the workplace – especially given that we spend the majority of our time there, racking up, on average, 7.2 hours overtime a week (with four million of us working more than 48 hours). Surely the lines between personal and professional are becoming increasingly blurred in terms of timeframe and behaviour?

According to Vingerhoets, we do 80% of our crying in intimate settings, and most often between

the hours of 7pm and 10pm, when we should be at home with loved ones but increasingly might be working late or socialising with colleagues. Plus, when we do cry in public, it really *means* something as we are also biologically programmed to be embarrassed by crying. "Crying is taking a risk," says Vingerhoets. "If you go back to prehistoric times it was a risk for a newborn to cry, because it also attracts the attention of other predators." We are almost hardwired to be reluctant to cry in the company of strangers.

It is, of course, about office culture too. We are striving to adhere to societal norms that were established by the white, middle-class men who predominantly founded the businesses we work in. There are currently no official HR guidelines to advise managers on how to cope with those crying in the workplace, and Kinman says women can feel like 'gender traitors' if they do. "Women who are seen as emotional can feel they are letting down other women who are working hard to appear rational," she says.

The idea is perpetuated by experts who label crying in the office as unprofessional. "Men and women should avoid crying in the workplace if possible," says career coach Diana Norris (careerbalance.co.uk). "What you want from your colleagues is respect and admiration not

tea and sympathy. If you have a difficult situation in your private life, then work can actually be a relief; a place you can go to and give your mind a break from what is troubling you elsewhere."

LET IT OUT

Despite this, some of us can't help having a little weep occasionally. Which *can* be a good thing, as it can be detrimental for us to maintain too strict a control over our emotions. Not only can repressed emotions cause escalating stress levels and weaken our immune system, tears can act as a sort of safety valve, used by the body to release excess stress hormones in our tears such as cortisol (chronic levels of which can effect our physical and mental health).

Dr Sandi Mann, senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Central Lancashire, describes bottling up our emotions in the workplace as "emotional labour". "The effort it takes to fake or hide emotions can be compared to physical labour; it causes huge mental stress – it can make you lose your sense of identity, as if your employer 'owns' your emotions."

When we do get upset, we

are giving ourselves a harder time than we deserve as well. Occupational psychologists have found that women who have cried at work judged themselves *far* more harshly than they judged others who became outwardly upset in the office. Plus, there is also no research to back up the idea that crying has a detrimental impact on your career. To the contrary, recent US research found that 41% of women and

9% of men in all levels of management had cried at work during the previous year, and they all said it made *no* difference to their success. Which is where highly emotive responses can be a valuable tool for becoming *better* at work. Research psychologist Dr Peggy Drexler says, "Crying can be a valuable way to address something that's bubbling under the surface and could pop up later in a more damaging way."

ALL CHANGE

Going forward, we need to reclaim our office emotions and reap the benefits. Expressing panic or distress in an intimate setting, with trusted co-workers, can reinforce the bond between employees, as they will work together to address the situation that's upsetting one of their 'tribe'. Moreover, psychologists suggest people are more likely to connect with what they view as authentic displays of emotion, rather than the stoic business 'masks' we wear, meaning we will actually communicate *more* effectively with our teams. Being aware of emotions, in itself, implies controllability and that you have *chosen* to share them. In



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

turn, because the process of expressing emotion calls on the formation of memory structure, it also improves your memory.

Before you stock your desk drawers with Kleenex, there are rules to remember too and emotion needs regulating to achieve results. Firstly, reserve heightened emotion for small group situations or one-to-ones. Expression of emotion will only build relationships if it's intimate – allowing you to learn new information about others and finding new common ground. We also have to understand how we can leverage our emotions; keep them measured; don't let them affect others or their work; and *never* cry to get your own way. Others can innately sense if tears are genuine or not, and it will be of no benefit to your career to be labelled disingenuous. A key factor is also working on your emotional quotient to ensure things don't spin out of control – understand the cause of your emotion, and the consequence. If you need time to do this, excuse yourself and reconvene. Remember that you can influence the emotional tone of your team, enabling the often fluffy topic of emotion to be, if channelled correctly, transformed into serious business.

Crying is what makes us human. Our emotions were developed as survival mechanisms – they're woven into our biology. The 'anti-crying law' is one we're imposing on ourselves. Perhaps it's time to shake it off, once and for all. Of course, it depends on the situation. We are by no means suggesting you should bawl like Gazza in your next brainstorming session, but nor should you chastise yourself if you get a bit teary when a project becomes too much to handle.

Remember, the emotional part of our brains came into existence two million years before the analytical part. We can't make a decision without it. And we shouldn't have to.

Do you think it's now ok to cry in the office? Share your thoughts @Stylist Magazine #cryingatwork