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TURNING WEAKNESS INTO STRENGTH: THE BENEFITS OF SHEDDING EMOTIONAL TEARS

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Abstract

This study investigated the benefits of the human experience of shedding emotional tears in the physiological, psychological and social perspectives. Two hundred twenty randomly chosen adolescents aging sixteen to nineteen years old wherein one hundred fifty nine are females and sixty one are males participated in this research. Descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages were used to describe this human experience of shedding emotional tears. Focus Group Discussions with 20 students were conducted to validate the data gathered from the survey. Likewise, the personal observations of the researcher as a practicing counselor and youth minister were considered in this study. Results reveal that crying is indeed beneficial to humans because such relieves the pain that they are feeling. Crying helps in releasing stress and it eases the pain. Majority of the research participants believe that crying is good for the heart because it makes them feel better afterwards. Others may look at it as a weakness that is why they hold back their tears. However, shedding emotional tears becomes strength when it binds people together. To give people a venue to do the good cry so that crying becomes very beneficial to many, a workshop module which is the output of this study was conceptualized. It is entitled “Shedding Emotional Tears: Understanding Emotional Communication.”

Keywords

Crying, Emotional Tears, Physiological, Psychological, Social

1. Introduction

While it has been normal for the researcher that people cry, once she met somebody who declared to her that he does not cry. Such surprised the researcher, and even made her very curious, until she decided to conduct this study about crying which later she has learned to be properly referred to as shedding emotional tears. Thus, in this study, the term crying is used to also refer to shedding emotional tears.

Living creatures are blessed with sense organs like the eyes to be able to function well and become productive members of society. However, only the human beings are gifted with tears that are triggered by emotions. (Oaklander, 2016) The eyes that are part of the person's face do not only serve as the sense of sight but also allows us to show or express our feelings to others. There are many mechanisms that are designed for the protection the eyes. One among the characteristics of the protective system of the eyes is the tears that are being produced in the lacrimal gland at the outer corner of the eyes. The tears are composed with water and salt as well as proteins, glucose, and substances that kill bacteria. Tears flush away dust and dirt. They moisten the eyes in order for the eyelids not to scratch the surface during blinks.

When shed in response to emotional situations, tears contain about twenty four percent more protein than tears shed to respond to irritants, such as onions. (Oaklander, 2016) Emotional tears come from the same tear glands that produce the fluid that forms a protective film over the eyeballs to keep them free from irritants. Extra fluid is being released by the tear glands when the eye becomes irritated or is invaded by a foreign body.

Crying serves as an important means of non-verbal communication and possibly contributes to stress reduction. The composition of emotional tears helps us rid the body of several proteins that are associated with stress. Literally, we should feel better after removing these chemicals during a good cry. Since infancy, we cry to get help (Freberg, 2014). Tears add valence and nuance to the perception of faces. They are helpful in ensuring the smooth relationship of people in a community by helping them communicate with each other in a non-verbal manner. (Provine, 2013 & Evolutionary Psychology, 2013 in Collier, 2014).

The present study investigated the benefits of this human experience of shedding emotional tears in physiological, psychological as well as in social perspectives. Specifically, this study delved into the following: (1) top most reasons why the adolescents shed emotional tears; (2) the top most situations wherein adolescents usually shed emotional tears; and (3) the benefits of shedding emotional tears.

2. Theoretical Background

Tears serve as an instrument to convey messages to other people (Kaplan, 2016). For adults, shedding emotional tears could be a means of indirectly communicating others that something is wrong with the person crying.

Tears are a non-verbal emotional communication that may lower the defenses of the person seeing another person crying. By blurring vision, tears lower defenses and reliably function as signals of submission. This may also signal as a cry for help, and even in a mutual display of attachment and as a group display of cohesion because tears may solicit mercy and compassion.

When tears blur vision, they could readily handicap aggressive behavior. As such, tears reliably signal vulnerability, a strategy that can emotionally bind others closer to you. Hasson suggested the use of tears could be to build and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Also, by sharing tears with others, it is another way of saying “tone down as well or calm down like me.” Such is a non-verbal message that “we can bond, we can be friends, or we can help each other.”

In this theory, Hasson also emphasized that the efficacy of this evolutionary behavior always depends on who you are with when you cry, and it would not be probably effective in places like at work when emotions should be hidden. (Choi, 2009)

In the research conducted by the psychotherapist Dr. Judith Kay Nelson, she concludes that securely attached people are more comfortable expressing emotions and cry in ways that are considered normal and healthy. (Collier, 2014)

The Attachment Theory by a Psychologist John Bowlby claims that the ability for an individual to form an emotional and physical "attachment" to another person gives a sense of stability and security necessary to take risks, branch out, and grow and develop as a personality. Attachment as defined by Bowlby is a ‘lasting psychological connectedness between human beings. (B. & A., 2015)

Tears are of extreme relevance to human nature. We cry because we need other people, according to Vingerhoets. Crying is an effective way to recover from a strong bout of emotion. Trimble emphasized that tears may as well show others of our vulnerability as a person, and vulnerability is captious to human connection. Crying can neutralize anger powerfully. This is why when we are angry and we cannot express freely our anger, our body resort to release the tension within by allowing the self to shed emotional tears. Most importantly, a good cry leads to catharsis wherein the person is given enough time and space to release emotional baggages, and allowing him or her for the experience to sink in within a certain period of time. (Oaklander, 2016)

On the other hand, according to a Clinical Psychologist Cord Benecke in Oaklander (20016), non-crying people tends to withdraw, and consequently develops relationships that are less connected. Most likely, they experienced more negative aggressive feelings like rage, anger and disgust, than people who cry. (Oaklander, 2016)

Another applicable theory is the Psychoanalytic or Psychodynamic theory of Sigmund Freud which also talks about Catharsis. A catharsis is an emotional release. This emotional release is linked to a need to relieve unconscious conflicts like experiencing stress over a work-related situation may cause feelings of frustration and tension. Rather than vent these feelings inappropriately, the individual may instead release these feelings in another way, such as through physical activity or another stress relieving activity which may be in a form of crying. While the spontaneous shedding of emotional tears could be therapeutic, holding back of tears may result to health problems such as high blood pressure. (Cherry, 2018)

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The descriptive design was used in this study to depict the human experience of shedding emotional tears highlighting the benefits people can derive from doing so. It aims to cast light on current issues or problems such as whether crying is a weakness or a strength through a process of data collection that enables the participants to describe the situation. (<https://research-methodology.net/descriptive-research/>)

This study used the descriptive methods of research to describe the benefits of shedding emotional tears in different aspects (physiological, psychological and social) of the human life.

3.2 Research Participants

The survey was conducted with two hundred twenty (220) randomly chosen adolescents aging sixteen to nineteen years old wherein one hundred fifty nine (159) students are female and sixty one (61) are male, coming from different regions in the Philippines. The focus group discussion was done with twenty students (10 female and 10 male) to validate results in the survey.

3.3 Research Instrument

The researcher's made questionnaire was used to gather data through survey. The questionnaire contains ten items of questions with ready-made answers to be checked by the respondents when applicable to them. Relevant Guide Questions were used in the Focus Group Discussions conducted to validate results of the survey.

3.4 Data Analysis and Statistical Treatment

The data were collected through survey using the researcher's made questionnaire. Using the descriptive statistics of frequency, percentage and rank, the data were analyzed. Results of the survey were validated through the Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Salient points were noted based on the topics of the discussions relevant to the benefits of shedding emotional tears.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study reveal that people cry because they are in pain, could be physical or emotional like feeling helpless and feeling sad and frustrated as shown in Figure 1 below.

4.1 Reasons for Shedding Emotional Tears

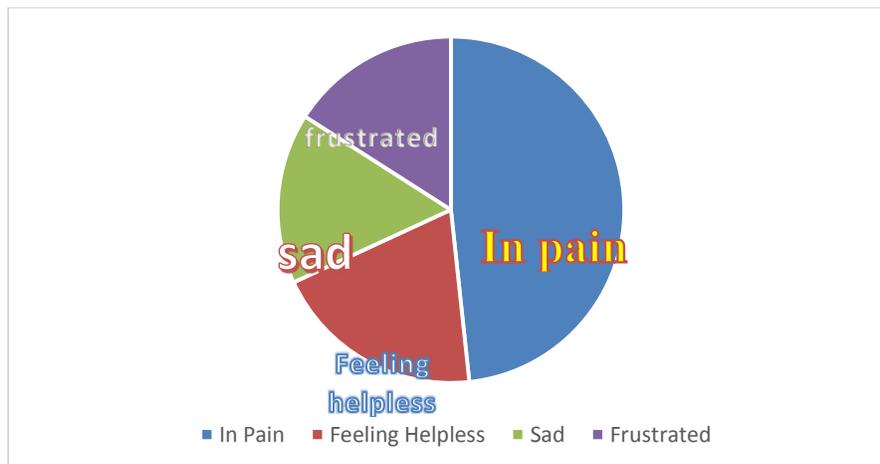


Figure 1: *Reasons why People Cry*

Figure 1 shows that forty eight percent of the research participants said that the top most reason why they shed emotional tears is when they are in pain. Twenty percent of the participants said they cry when they are feeling helpless. On the other hand, sixteen percent expressed that they shed tears when they are sad, and another sixteen percent of the participants said they cry when they feel frustrated. The findings of the present study is coherent with that of Ioannou, et al. (2016) entitled *Sympathy Crying: Insights from Infrared Thermal Imaging on a Female Sample*. Such study suggests that sympathy crying seems to have originated from subjective internal factors that relate to a person's own experiences and attributes with tears arising in the form of catharses or way of venting out negative emotions. Tears produced out of sympathy are part of a complex autonomic interaction between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems.

Cooke (2016) also pointed out that humans alone cry out of feeling. However, we cry not only when we are sad, but also when we are happy, overwhelmed, enraptured and in pain. But most often than not, as expressed by the participants of this study, most of them cry when they are in pain.

4.2 The Human Experiences When Crying Happens

Figure 2 below shows that death of a loved one is the top most situation wherein the fifty five point forty-five percent of the research participants shed emotional tears. Some other situations wherein the participants shed tears are quarrel with a loved one or a friend (15%), lost something very important (14.55%), break-up with boyfriend or girlfriend (10.45%), and physical injury (4.55%).

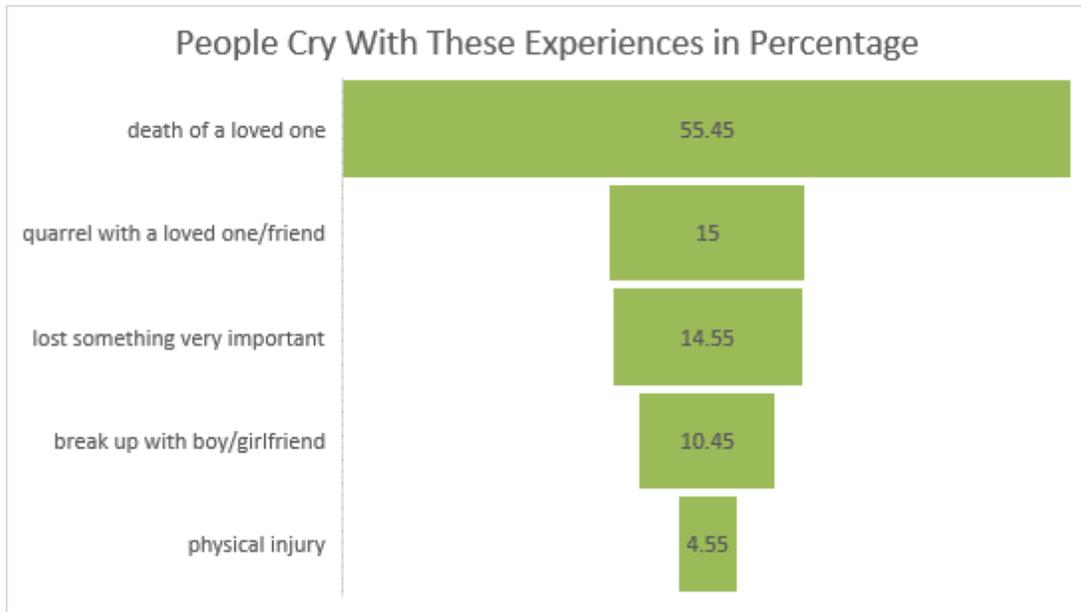


Figure 2: Situations Wherein Crying Happens

Parallel with the findings of the present study, the results of the study conducted by Ad Vingerhoets in Oaklander (2016) revealed that funerals and break ups are the most common tear triggers identified by his research participants aside from sad movies and TV shows. Tears trigger social bonding and human connection. Further, the research conducted by the psychotherapist Dr. Judith Kay Nelson concludes that people with secure attachment are more comfortable expressing emotions and cry in ways that are considered normal and healthy. (Collier, 2014)

Crying happens because of emotional connectedness like death of a loved one, break-up with the partner or quarrel with a loved one/friend.

4.3 Feeling after Crying

Crying may result to feeling relieved (as experienced by 65.45% of the research participants), tired but light (19.55 % of the participants experienced this), feeling tired and with heavy heart (10.45%) and feeling reenergized (said the 4.55% of the participants) as shown in Figure 3 below.

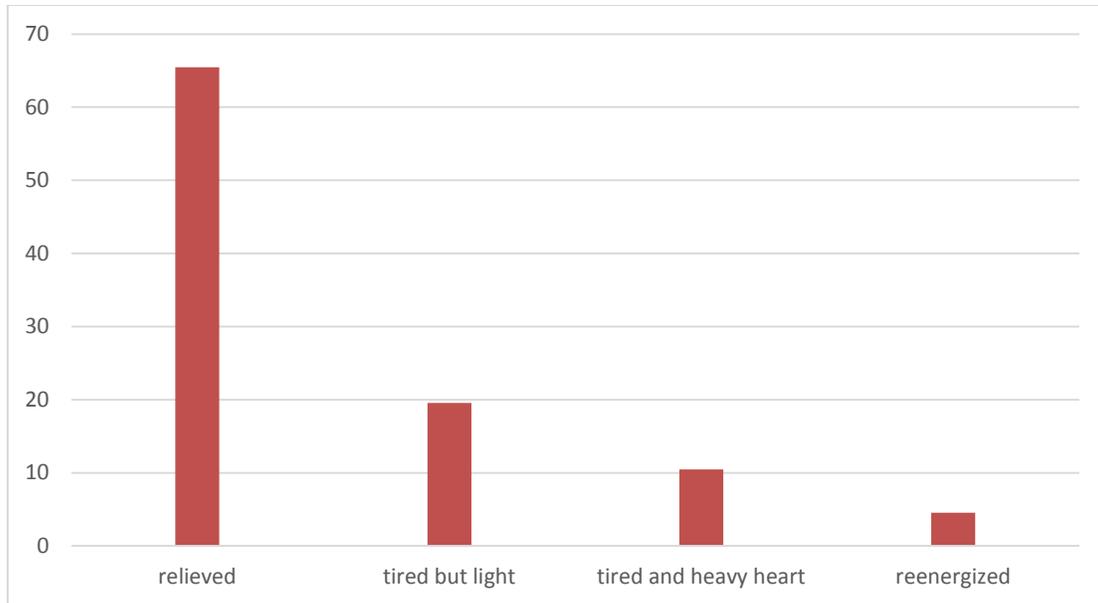


Figure 3: Feeling After Crying

The participants of the Focus Group Discussions likewise affirmed that of feeling relieved after crying because they are able to vent out negative emotions, and they are able to feel the support of their family members and friends especially when it is the loss of loved one that causes crying.

This is consistent with the study by Ad Vingerhoets cited in Oaklander, 2016 when he said that 52% of people report feeling better after crying. On the other hand, it may result also to feeling tired and heavy heart as well as to still feeling disturbed. In the study of Vingerhoets (Oaklander 2016), 38 % report feeling the same after crying, and 10% report feeling even worse. This may be because of not having a good cry.

4.4 Place Where Crying Preferably Done

Findings of this study reveal that sixty eight point sixty-four percent (68.64%) of the participants prefer to cry alone in a private place compared to only twenty seven point twenty seven percent (27.27 %) of them who said they prefer to cry with someone close to them in a private place. All participants in the FGD agreed that they need and prefer crying in private with or without a friend beside them. They find it a bit awkward to cry having other people around them.

In the research of Vingerhoets (Oaklander 2016), the findings revealed that 74% said they cry at home which is same with the present study. Thus, crying is a human experience conveniently done with privacy.

Crying done with a loved one or a friend makes people feel better because of having emotional support. However, criers felt worse if they felt embarrassed or ashamed of crying, if they were with unsupportive people or if they cried because they saw suffering. (Bylsma, Croon, Vingerhoets, & Rottenberg, 2011) This is very evident in counseling sessions, retreats and recollections. Clients tend to be at ease in pouring out their emotions when they feel having an emotional support from the group (in cases of group counseling). Most participants in retreats or recollections feel comfortable shedding emotional tears because a non-threatening environment is established there, wherein the participants feel safe and accepted including their being vulnerable to others. True enough, friendship is being normally built among them.

Further, the intimate therapy-style interviews with 120 individuals done by the clinical psychologist Cord Benecke revealed that the non-crying people have a tendency to withdraw and describe their relationship experiences as less connected. Tearless people also experienced more negative aggressive feelings like rage, anger and disgust, than people who cried.

Twenty two percent of patients with Sjogren's syndrome had significantly more difficulty in identifying their own feelings (Leeuwen in *Clinical and Experimental Rheumatology*, 2012 in Collier, 2014)

Emotions that would have been expressed through tears are bottled up inside when people suppress the urge to cry. The underlying biochemistry affects the body differently than if the feelings had found a physical release. Over time, repressed emotions can trigger physiological changes that manifest in clinical symptoms such as high blood pressure. A study published in the journal *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* found that football players who cried about game outcomes reported to have higher level of self-esteem. They felt secured enough to shed tears in front of their teammates and seemed less concerned about peer pressure. (Wong, Steinfeldt, Lafollette, & Tsao, 2011)

4.5 Who Cries the Most or Most Often?

Eighty eight percent of the research participants believe that women cry more compared to men. The FGD participants also find women to be crying the most unlike men. This may be the reason why only few men agreed to be part of the research participants of this study.

This finding affirms the results of other researches explored across the world decades ago. Women cry an average of 5.3 times a month, while men cry an average of 1.3 times per month according to the findings of the study of the biochemist Dr. William H. Frey. (Collier,

2014) This might as well be the reason why there are more female than male participants who got involved in this study.

Biology explains that it may be the hormone prolactin that is seen in women in higher levels that may promote crying, while testosterone that is present in men may inhibit crying. While science insists that crying is natural, culture still sends messages that strong men do not cry, until recently that many cultures believed that crying is a sign of manliness because of famous men who cried in public. (Whitney, 2012)

However, a study of people in 35 countries reveals that the difference between the number of times men and women cry may be more pronounced in countries that allow greater freedom of expression and social resources. (Cross-Cultural Research, 2011 in Collier, 2014) People in wealthier countries may cry more because they live in a culture that permits crying, while people in poorer countries who might have more to cry about don't do so because of cultural norms that frown on emotional expression. (Hemert, et. al. in Collier, 2014)

4.6 Perceptions about Crying

While all the participants in this study find it okay to cry, sixty eight point fifty six percent believe that being able to express one's emotions through crying is indeed being true to oneself.

In the focus group discussions (FGD), it was further discussed that crying is being true to oneself because it is being vulnerable to oneself and to others on how one exactly feels at the moment. Such statement was further affirmed by the participants of the FGD. Likewise, Ephraim (2013) mentioned about the book of John Powell entitled *Why I am Afraid to Tell You Who I Am* which describes the five levels of communication. It says that level 2 is the second to the highest level and it is about expressing one's feelings and emotions. Being vulnerable is being honest on the way one is feeling at present. It is commonly said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. This is the very reason why eye contact is very important when we talk face to face with others and even in counseling sessions.

4.7 Shedding Emotional Tears as Beneficial to Humans

Parallel with the researcher's assumption in this research that people may benefit from shedding emotional tears, ninety six point thirty six percent (96.36%) of the research participants find crying to be beneficial. They said crying helps them release stress and it eases the pain. They believe that crying is good for the heart because it makes them feel better afterwards. The participants of the Focus Group Discussion revealed that they indeed find shedding emotional

tears very beneficial to their health. Once not in good mood, or once lonely or angry, crying helps them feel better afterwards. For them, crying is a no cost therapy for a lonely or hurting self.

Crying can make one feel better. (Fischer, 2015) However, the findings of the study of Vingerhoets and his colleagues introduced the so-called good cry that is actually cathartic. It is having enough time to sink in after the release of emotion.

A good cry indeed might go a long way to make one feel better. (Springer, 2015) This is the reason why when we see people crying, it is proper not to talk to them or touch them right away, but to give them time to shed emotional tears, let the experience sink in them for some time, and talk to them when they are ready.

Biochemist Frey found that emotional tears carried more protein than non-emotional tears. Thus, shedding emotional tears help one go through the process of healing. (Collier, 2014)

Moreover, Frey said that the chemicals that build up during emotional stress may be removed in our tears when we cry because unalleviated stress can increase our risk for heart attack and damage certain areas of our brain. The ability of humans to cry has survival value. (Dobson, 2012) Crying may have health benefits such as releases stress, kills pain, washes away germs, and improves ones vision (Fischer, 2015). The same findings were cited by Borreli (2015) as to health benefits of crying. It can cleanse us physiologically and psychologically. The protein prolactin, adrenocorticotrophic hormones, and the endorphin leucine-enkephalin that are present in emotional crying reduce pain. Tears contain the fluid lysozyme that can kill ninety to ninety five percent of all bacteria in just five to ten minutes. They have the capacity to clear up our vision by lubricating the eyeballs and eyelids. Crying also prevents the dehydration of the various mucous membranes. It can be self-soothing and elevate mood better than any antidepressant. Crying releases stress hormones or toxins from the body that reduces tension. Crying can quell a fight, emphasize a point not gotten across in words, or simply underscore the importance of the feelings behind the dialogue. These same findings are affirmed in the write up of Mann (2018) as well as in the article of Sollitto (2018).

Shedding emotional tears could result to additional lubrication to the eyes which could offer extra physical benefits to the eye. (Kalin, 2012)

While crying is very beneficial to those who are comfortable doing it, the researcher also see some truth in the correlation between crying and attachment. As observed, the non-crying person indeed has attachment issues.

A study at Tilburg University in The Netherlands support the theory that crying is an attachment behavior designed to elicit help from others, according to the Dutch researchers. (Dobson, 2008)

Unresolved attachment issues during adolescence may result to attachments issues in adulthood. The study of Millings, Hepper, Hart, Swift, & Rowe (2016) revealed that while high avoidant individuals reported believing that crying was both unhealthy and controllable, high anxious individuals reported believing that crying was a healthy behavior, but one that they could not control.

5. Output – Workshop Module

This module conceptualized a workshop which aims to discuss emotional expressions as means of emotional communication of human beings with their fellows. This specifically tackles the physiological, psychological and social benefits of a good cry. Contrary to the culture that says “crying is a sign of weakness,” this workshop gives the participants a first-hand experience of the therapeutic effect of shedding emotional tears which will make them feel better and lighter (cathartic). Moreover, this provides them with some tips on how to make a good cry and how to properly deal with a person who is crying. Related activities and a short input on the science of crying will be done in the workshop. Group cohesion is a bonus for groups or individuals undergoing this workshop for once only.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1 Conclusion

This study affirms many of what are written on literature as well as the findings of the existing researches about crying. Results of this study confirm that indeed crying is beneficial especially if it is a good cry because it has positive effects both physiologically and psychologically. While holding back tears could result to a heavy heart and head ache according to the research participants, crying could help relieve physical and emotional pain, and could also help reduce stress. Results of the survey and the focus group discussion conducted compliment each other. Pain is the top most reason why people shed emotional tears. Crying indeed cleanses a person’s physical body and his or her soul.

The benefits of crying in physiological perspective include:

1. Good for the heart

2. Helps to lessen the burden
3. Releasing negative energy like tension and anxiety
4. Helps to feel light
5. Lessen heartache

The psychological benefits of crying are:

1. Helps relieve/ease the pain
2. Relieves the stress
3. Makes a person feel better (cathartic)
4. Helps lighten the feeling when sad or down
5. Anti-depression
6. It's like letting go
7. A way of coping with difficult experiences

In social/interpersonal perspective, shedding emotional tears becomes a strength because it:

1. calls for a sympathy from others
2. strengthens friendship with other people
3. helps build community

6.2 Recommendation

The findings of this study are very enlightening to many. While the initial reaction of people seeing a person crying is asking why and doing everything to make the person stop crying, it is important to note that allowing the person to pour out and let go of his/her negative feelings such as sadness, frustration or pain is indeed therapeutic.

It is being recommended that further studies on shedding emotional tears be conducted but better if it will focus on the therapeutic crying or the good cry so that many will truly benefit from shedding emotional tears. The economic status, culture and different age groups are variables to be considered also in the next researches to be done so as to affirm or negate the findings of the existing researches on crying. An experimental approach in research could be utilized to know which is more effective, crying with someone close to the person crying in a private place or crying alone in a private place.

A study on how crying could be instrumental in the healing of those who have attachment issues is also interesting to conduct.

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