

LIFE

Why do middle-aged men keep crying?

Men are starting to talk about their emotions, but their wives aren't always ready for that, a leading therapist tells Helen Rumbelow



Forget "boys don't cry". It can be cathartic for men to cry and talk about their problems

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[Helen Rumbelow](#)

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Andrew Tate, self-appointed minister of macho, last week admitted to crying in prison, although he was offended by the word “crying” and preferred to describe it as “tears that ran down my face”. (“That’s crying,” replied Piers Morgan in the interview. “I would disagree,” Tate said.) Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist who preaches a gospel of masculinity, cries so often, there are “top ten” compilations of his most popular crying jags on YouTube. There you will also find men who have posted videos of themselves in states of ugly-bawling emotional destruction after watching *Past Lives*, this year’s Korean-American version of the old British weepie *Brief Encounter*.

By contrast Barack Obama brought dignity to a statesmanlike teardrop on the presidential cheek. Boris Johnson did not cry in public but freely admitted to moments of private ductal incontinence. Something is loosening and leaking from the male psyche. But here is the next question: are women ready?

- [Andrew Tate still popular with cohort of teen boys, poll shows](#)

We have all seen the rather more obvious changes women have made in rejecting historic gender norms, pulling on the office trousers and advancing into leadership and breadwinning roles. Men have mainly accommodated — or advocated for — them. But what if the next barrier meant it was women, not men, playing catch-up to a fast-changing society? What if some women had to update their sexist and traditional responses to a vulnerable, tearful man? What if the next barrier to progress wasn’t a glass ceiling but a sodden hankie?

That is the hypothesis of Julie Hannan, a psychologist and author of *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*. When she began giving therapy 12 years ago an overwhelming majority of her clients were female. Now they are an even gender split. She is increasingly seeing cases of middle-aged men seeking to become more emotionally open with their wives, including via shows of tearfulness, but instead encountering a confusing lack of interest or even rejection. Hannan believes it to be a sign of a cultural tide — a very saline one

— on the turn. Some men see their therapy sessions as a place they can cry without judgment.

“Here’s the problem,” Hannan says. “Men in their forties and fifties are starting to break through and talk about their emotions. And some women who got married to the strong silent type, the emotional regulator, may be unnerved, they may think, ‘Hang on a second, this wasn’t the deal we got into.’”

“There are more men wanting to shift towards that dynamic with their long-term partners and not getting the emotional understanding in return. That’s a lot of what I see now.”

These women, I say, may not like to think of themselves as sexist, but is theirs a sexist response?

“It is,” Hannan says. “But it’s also a very sensitive topic for women.”

This is, she explains, because of what can be a fundamental mismatch between women and men in midlife. Women at this age can be at the end of their disproportionate caring responsibilities for children, eager to slough off their wet-wipe years and get out into the world, pursuing second careers or interests with renewed vigour. Meanwhile, men are often nearing the end of an uninterrupted stint in the office and, disillusioned, may be growing more interested in nurturing relationships, Hannan says.



Dr Julie Hannan: "Women need to be involved as well"

Sex hormones may play a role in both cases. The changes wreaked by oestrogen decline in women and fading testosterone in men may be affecting emotionality in different directions. At the same time, men in middle age now have absorbed the changes in their lifetime to the cultural script. Instead of “boys don’t cry”, they are told that it is good for men to talk and cathartic to weep. Many women welcome this, yet some men are bewildered when it puts a damper on their relationship.

Hannan tells me about a couple who sought her help in their late forties. After having children, the wife took on the main parenting duties and also cared for both sets of elderly parents while working part-time. The husband was an engineer who felt increasingly unhappy and finally began to break down in tears in front of his wife. Meanwhile, she felt exhausted in her caregiving role and didn’t have more to give to her husband. “She had spent years supporting other people emotionally and didn’t respond in a way that made him feel supported.”

- [**‘I lost my best friend and started a football club to help other men’**](#)

The idea that men are less emotional than women is a myth, according to studies. Male and female babies cry as much as each other. In fact, several studies show male infants cry or “fuss” more than female. When Donald Trump was asked by a late-night TV host when he last cried he claimed: “When I was one, I cried.” Charlotte Wahl, Johnson’s artist mother, spent long stints in a psychiatric hospital when her children were small. In a painting by her of Boris as a small boy titled *Where Is Mama?* he has tears springing from his eyes. The gap opens up during the primary school years when boys begin to cry less, and by the age of 11 the difference is marked, and a gender difference holds true across all cultures.

Some of this is biological. It is known that testosterone reduces the ability to cry. Research shows men who have testosterone-lowering treatment for prostate cancer cry more frequently. Lower testosterone may account for men becoming more “misty-eyed” in old age. Men also have larger tear ducts

— researchers know that a “welling” amount of tears for a man would probably lead to “cheek spillage” for a woman.

Yet culture is also important. Boys in modern Britain cry less even before hormones take hold. By contrast the heroes of the Greek epics, such as Odysseus, Agamemnon and Achilles, are often in tears. If Achilles is not fighting, he’s crying, and nearly all of the great heroes of the *Iliad* cry, most of them on the battlefield. Yet by Shakespeare’s time, his Coriolanus tersely states: “It is no little thing to make mine eyes to sweat compassion.” The warriors of 20th-century world wars were models of dry-eyed repression. So too the 21st-century “superheroes” — if they cried in those latex masks, they’d get nappy rash. Even in recent decades parents and teachers are shown by researchers to be more tolerant of boys expressing emotion through anger than sadness, and the reverse for girls.

This is despite men being just as emotional, or sometimes even more emotional, than women. One study in 2021 from Lancaster University analysed 184,000 people who posted their relationship problems to an anonymous online forum. Men were more likely than women to focus on emotional pain rather than pragmatic solutions. Meanwhile another 2021 study from the University of Michigan tracked a group of 142 men and women over 75 days, who regularly had to log their emotions. They found no difference between the sexes — “They ride the same emotional rollercoaster,” as the researchers put it.

However, men have been conditioned to hide it. This is what psychologists call “restrictive emotionality”, a stigma against expressiveness that men endure like a tight pair of Spanx. It may have grave consequences for men. Men make up three quarters of suicides in Britain, and middle-aged men are more likely to die by suicide than any other age group. Restrictive emotionality is a state best embodied by Anthony Hopkins in the film of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Remains of the Day*. Recently Hopkins said of the role “... there is that feeling of tremendous loneliness, tremendous loss, tremendous turmoil that has to be pushed down. I think a lot of men do that. Women not so much.”

“When I was young,” Hopkins said, “I was told, ‘Don’t show tears.’ For most of my life I was self-contained. But now as I’m getting older I cry at the drop of a hat.”

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Hopkins isn’t the only one. Crying isn’t an exact proxy for emotional expressiveness but it’s a very visible one. I contacted Ad Vingerhoets, a Dutch clinical psychologist who has studied crying for 20 years and contributed many research studies and books to the subject. Vingerhoets said that there is no good data that proves an increase in male crying in recent decades, but it can be clearly noted anecdotally. There have been small surveys such as one in 2016 for Universal Channel that showed men in middle age had become several times more comfortable crying than their fathers. They reported crying in front of others on average 14 times in their adult lives, compared with five in their fathers’ boomer generation.

“Especially in sports, we see more men cry after a win or a defeat,” Vingerhoets said. With players from Paul Gascoigne to Lionel Messi turning on the waterworks, it sometimes seems the point of a football season ticket is that it comes with a “full emotions allowed” licence for men.

Vingerhoets said that in his experience women welcomed expressions of vulnerability in a romantic partner. However, others are not so sure. It was more than 20 years ago that in an episode of *Friends* Rachel tries to get her tough boyfriend Paul, played by Bruce Willis, to “open up a bit”. After some cajoling, Paul does so, and ends up in an unstoppable crying marathon that is played for shaming laughs and ultimately disgusts Rachel so much that she dumps him.

Yet just last year this tweet by a woman went viral: “I’m seeing the pendulum swing from ‘men shouldn’t cry’ to ‘a man crying has zero effect on his attractiveness’ and neither of these are true.” Almost overwhelmingly, female respondents angrily contradicted this statement. Yet it is clear we are a culture still in transition over male emotional expressiveness. A journalist

colleague recently interviewed a CEO in his office and the conversation turned emotional and the interviewee cried. The pair then had to while away time awkwardly for a further 20 minutes for all traces of the CEO's red-eye to subside. "There's no way I can go out there," he said of his open-plan office, "looking like this."

Andrew Reiner is an American university lecturer on gender studies and the author of *Better Boys, Better Men*. Reiner once recounted an experiment conducted by a male and female student where they stood in the lobby of a crowded university library and pretended to cry. People stopped to try to help the young woman crying but not the young man. Why not, Reiner asked the male student. "It's like we're scared," the young man said, "that the natural order of things will completely collapse."

To return to Hannan's couple where the woman was ill-equipped to cope with her husband's tears, therapy helped for the husband, as did confiding in a wider circle of supportive friends. The wife also adjusted over time: examining her own prejudices, and how sometimes the "strongest" action can be to reveal weakness.

"Women need to be involved as well," Hannan says. "They can say, 'Maybe up until this point he has been able to support himself emotionally, but now he needs our help.' Just because he is a man doesn't mean he's not human."

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