

The case for crying out loud

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS sitting in a coffee shop recently with some friends. We had just heard some bad news and although we probably should have stayed home and talked it through, we decided to go out to cheer ourselves up.

Somewhere between courses, my tears came. I couldn't stop them. The harder I tried, the harder they began to fall. One friend had a classic response. "Shhhh, shhhh," she started saying, patting my arm, but quite obviously upset by the noise I was making.

Even through the tears I could see her distress at having to be sitting at a table with someone who was noisily blubbing. She was turning her head this way and that, shrugging at the waitress and shifting in her seat. "Don't cry any more," was all she could muster. Which only made me cry louder. Finally anger welled up alongside the grief and I snapped rather loudly: "Why? Why should I stop crying? It isn't an embarrassment to express emotions in public. It is an embarrassment not to."

In retrospect, my reaction was probably not realistic. According to prominent counsellor and author Mal McKissock, in Anglo-Saxon society we are governed by the "passion police". In short, we are not taught to handle public displays of any sorts of feelings. And not even the most gentle of us, like my friend, knows what to do when someone is making a ruckus.

McKissock is a big proponent of change, travelling the country and the world lecturing fellow counsellors on how to deal with passionate emotions when they arise.

"We are constantly monitored by the volume police," he says over the phone from Venice, where he is teaching. "Can you hear the noise in the background? It's the Italians celebrating life. In Australia, passion is often unacceptable. We don't like open or loud expressions of love, excitement, sexuality, crying or anger. In our society, we treat the normal emotions with anti-depressants which block the system. Sadness and passion do not equal anti-depressants."

McKissock, who co-directs the Bereavement CARE Centre, in Sydney, says that strong emotions often lead to a biochemical change within the body which helps bolster our immune system. There is no truth that people should control themselves or that strong emotions equal madness.

"A cry gives you a hit of narcotics which helps the body cope. Studies have shown that a morphine-like substance called meta-enkephalin exists in tears which is transmitted through the eyelids into the bloodstream."

I remember from my prenatal classes that there is healing power in sounds made at the height of pain. Screaming during childbirth can help our bodies release endorphins and other opiates that calm the nervous system. The urge to cry, scream, or howl is primordial and necessary and we should learn to trust the body's need to do this.

McKissock says: "I tell nurses, doctors and other carers that you don't have to do anything to silence people when they are in grief or shock, just let people emotionally vomit. Then there is a time when touching, holding, calming down is appropriate."

Interestingly, McKissock isn't the only one giving validity to the expressing of heavier or stronger emotions. After the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States last year, I wrote a piece quoting best-selling US psychologist Harriet G. Lerner. In her classic *The Dance of Anger* she claims that anger is a signal worth listening to. That our rage may be a message that we are being hurt and that our rights are being violated. That our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right.

McKissock, like Lerner, makes a distinction between anger and aggression. "When I talk about openly expressing anger, I am not talking about aggression which is an act of violation and is unacceptable. But angry feelings, appropriately expressed, are a natural reaction to pain."

It seems to me that the cycle of censorship and repression starts with parenting. We try to sooth and placate babies when they are crying with the "Shhhh ... shhhh ..." but there are often reasons children are crying -- hunger, pain, fear -- and our needing to silence them is often more about trying to calm our own anxiety levels. We are shushed as children, and in turn we shush, making our children fearful of expressing emotions.

But as McKissock points out, not all cultures have this approach. In some Mediterranean countries, it's normal to yell, scream and carry on as part of a healthy venting of feelings. There are even professional wailers and mourners hired to help people make a huge, public display of grief.

In Italy, open expressions of sexuality are acceptable and there are parks allotted for couples to make love in.

Maybe there does have to be a happy medium. But a few tears of grief in a restaurant is certainly not a crime. And I feel it's time we honoured this and other natural, biological processes.

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