

Water works

Ruth Ostrow

WHEN all-time great tennis player Roger Federer recently broke down and cried in humility after his amazing win at the finals of the Australian Open, it caused quite a stir – largely because of the rawness of his self-expression.

The women I spoke to were absolutely smitten: "Oh, what an amazing man. How wonderful. He must be sooooo sensitive," said one friend. "I love it when a man shows emotion like that. It was very inspiring. His vulnerability made me cry," said another.

But at least three men commented to me that seeing Federer's outpouring was too confronting. As one man summed up: "Seeing all that sobbing on TV made me uncomfortable. I don't like watching grown men lose it, even if it's because they're happy. A few tears on a man is fine but if snot starts coming out, or jaws start quivering, it's ... yuck. It shows a total lack of self-control."

Perhaps it's a chick thing to love male tears and quivering jaws – all that female heart openness looking for a reflection in a gender that is taught to keep emotions in zip-locked bags, and tears plunged down so deep that grief is often expressed as anger and joy as drunken misbehaviour.

As a liberationist, I was proud of Federer. I've fought hard all my life to make people feel comfortable expressing feelings we're taught are wrong or dangerous.

Wellness experts agree that it's not healthy to suppress feelings any more than it is to hold any bodily excrement inside. It plays havoc with hormones, unbalances our delicate internal ecology and leads to stress and immune deficiency. As my mama taught me: "Better out than in."

Sad, then, that men – more so than women – are forced to put time limits on grief, urged to "get over it" or "stop being so maudlin" in times of crisis, and are still not free to open their souls to joy or pain. But the more that male icons like "Mr Cool" Federer do it, the more we as a society will adapt.

It's a matter of leadership. I remember Bob Hawke crying after the Tiananmen Square massacre and over his infidelities. As a nation, we were strangely comforted by our leader's compassion, vulnerability and flawed humanity. There seemed to be something we all got from it – permission to let go. Be real. I hope that, in time, more macho men, sportsmen and cultural leaders show us their deeper sides. It's high time we understood the consequences of repressing the voice of the soul.

Otherwise, I'm going to (hiccup) ... cry.

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