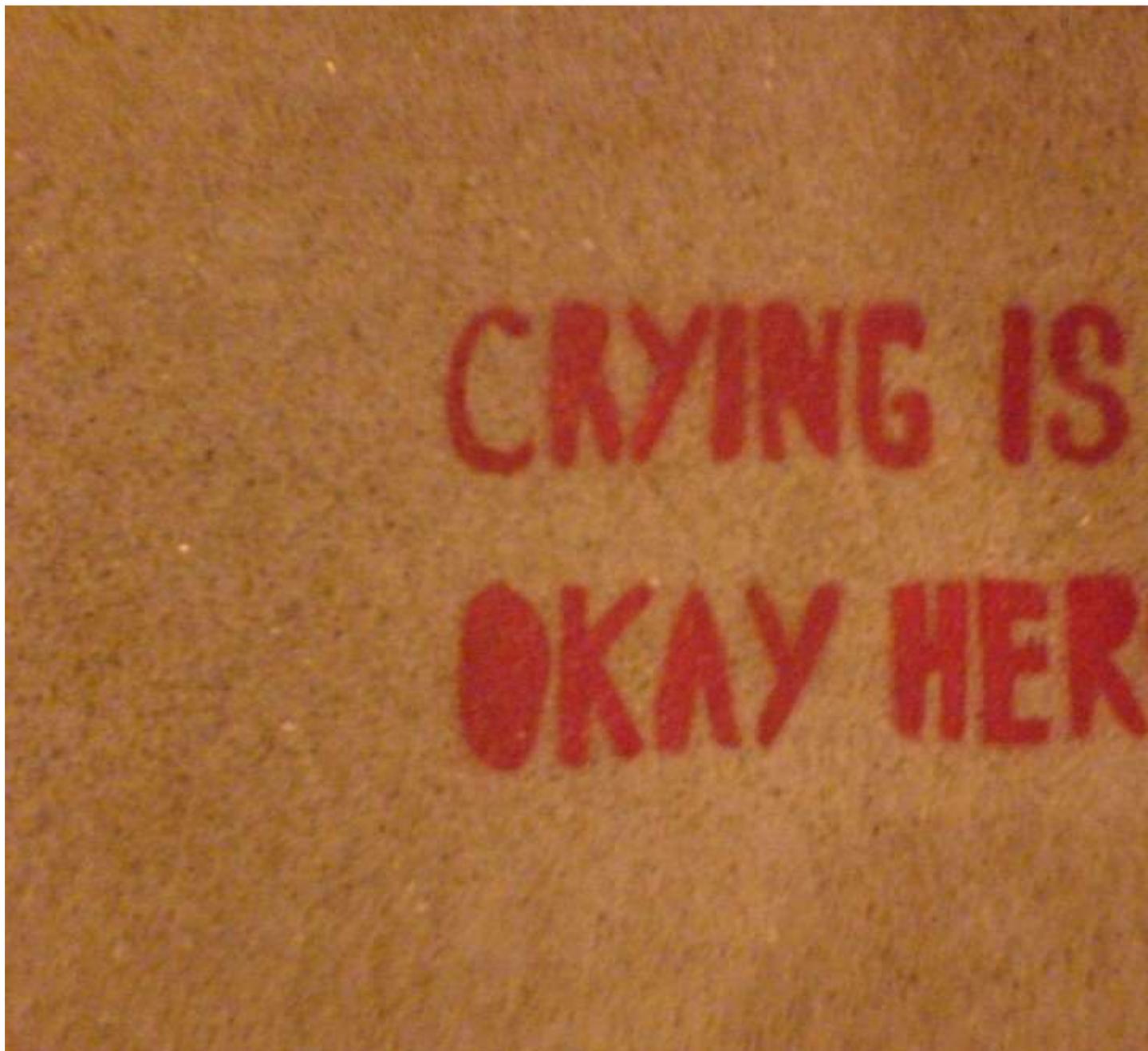


Let the Tears Flow: Crying is the Ultimate Healer

[Healing Emotional Pain and Loss](#) By [Bob Livingstone, LCSW](#) May 4, 2015 Updated May 4, 2015

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Long ago I came to believe that grieving is impossible unless you can experience your own pain and if you can't feel your own pain, it is almost impossible to feel anyone else's. You can walk through life in a state of numbness missing the excitement and the sadness that life has to offer. You can create walls designed to keep you from being hurt, from being abandoned. You can drink and take drugs to excess in order to prevent you from feeling what you imagine to be unrelenting/unforgiving pain.

Most likely the pain you are diligently attempting to avoid is not worth all the high-powered energy expended to block it. The blocking may make it difficult to form close relationships. It may also negatively affect your judgement. Walking around in a state of numbness may exacerbate depression and anxiety.

My father died when I was fifteen and I thought that I was doing "fine" except that I wasn't. It took about 25 years to really cry about his death. Part of the problem was that I had trouble moving out of a place of disbelief. How do you get your heart and head around the death of one of your parents while you are a teenager? I felt that I had layers of numbness, drugs and unhealthy distractions that prevented me from staying with the memories of my dad dying, the hospital, the funeral and the stark loneliness that followed.

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I was unaware that I was a master at distracting myself from all bad feelings. We were taught as boys that real men don't cry and this was an important part of my identity. I was "the man of the house" – whatever the hell that was. I worked, but didn't have enough money to pay the mortgage; not even close. I was assigned this role by friends and neighbors, but never had any idea of what I was supposed to say or do. The only way I related to this role was out of intense anger. I had a chip on my shoulder and had no interest in having the chip fall off.

When I turned 40 the pattern of stuffing, avoiding and distracting was no longer working for me, not that it ever really "worked." I learned how to actually experience my own pain by crying.



About six years ago I had a health crisis where my heart temporarily stopped working and I nearly died. Facing my own near death was very tough and at times the numbness would return. I wanted to understand how almost dying affected me emotionally and existentially.

Every anniversary of my passing out, I duplicate the same course I ran when my heart stopped. I listen to the same song (I want to Know what Love is – the Leela James version) as I run past the spot of lawn where I fell to the ground.

I was running at a fast clip and the sun was sneaking through the trees when Leela's soulful voice flowed into my ears. I looked at the grass and remembered passing out almost at that exact minute six years ago. I felt this intense sensation in my stomach that caused my throat to ache and then the tears started pouring. I thought about how terrifying my life had been after that moment. I didn't know if I was going to die or not. I was able to make it back home and went to work, but felt like I was going to collapse every time I stood up. I didn't tell anyone for a week because I was in denial and I learned that it is also shameful to have a severe illness in our country. I went to the hospital and was told to go home and essentially wait for my condition to get worse.

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The tears were streaming out of my eyes and my feet pounded the pavement as I continued to relive this chapter of my life. I was so scared and I didn't know if I was going to die or not be able to function. I felt so alone and frightened. I continually monitored my body. Every ache and pain meant that catastrophe was on its way. Sometimes I questioned if these body aches were real or imaginary. I spent so much time locked into this state – three to four years. Every step became too much. I couldn't walk up the steps. My wife, Gail looked at me with terror in her eyes.

The next week Gail drove me to the emergency room. When they tried to measure my heart rate, they could not obtain a reading. The nurse thought the equipment was faulty. Finally they got a reading of 24. Normal heart rate is 80 to 100 beats per minute. The cardiologist later told me that the fact I was a runner kept me alive. Most folks couldn't tolerate a heart rate of 24. They would be dead and perhaps I was hours away from being a corpse. On May Day 2009 a heart pacemaker was installed in my chest.

I was exhausted from crying after I finished my run. I remembered what it was like to almost die. It was surreal, terrifying and I had a deep sense that it was not time for me to go. There was just too much I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to laugh with my friends. Have deep conversations with my family. Look into Gail's smiling brown eyes. Write, play the drums, learn to play the guitar, go to France, fight against injustice and be able to rest without worrying.

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The gut wrenching tears returned. I no longer scan my body 24/7. I no longer fear that I will pass out and die 20 times a day. I no longer spend the majority of my day immersed in fear. Most of my days are filled with positive thoughts and I am filled with optimistic energy. I take a deep breath as I reflect on these amazing changes.

Maybe one of our main tasks in life is to learn how to grieve. Experiencing my own pain while crying helped me understand what I went through. I will now honor how terrified I was and how much I really didn't want to die. I slow down my racing thoughts and exhale deeply. I love life and want it to last forever.