

Useful Stuff



THE SPITZ TAKE

Get in the Bawl Game

We know it's okay to show our vulnerability, but it's still difficult. One weepy guy hopes to change that. By Eric Spitznagel

Our cultural consensus on male crying can be summed up by a scene in *The Godfather*, where Don Vito Corleone slaps the weeping singer Johnny Fontane and screams, "You can act like a man!" We like to think we're more evolved, that we've moved beyond masculinity clichés. But remember how you felt the last time you saw a man cry? When a woman cries, we want to comfort her. But when a guy tears up, we recoil and enter panic mode. "What's happening? Did your dog die? Do you have cancer?"

On some level we know crying is okay. But knowing that and acting on it are very different. Most of us would rather get advice on erectile dysfunction from a father-in-law than let a single tear roll down our cheeks. That can't be healthy, right?

We asked Andrew Reiner, a Towson University professor who teaches a seminar called "Real Men Smile: The Changing Face of Masculinity," to talk about man tears—and whether we should rethink our relationship with them.

MEN'S HEALTH: Talking about crying is hard. Just the idea of it makes me want to throw a football at your nuts and then shotgun a beer.

ANDREW REINER: [Laughs.] Well, sure, you're a guy. That's what guys do.

But why? What's the big deal about crying?

That's the question. One of the things I ask my students is "What if we had a world where guys were allowed to show a wider range of emotions? What if we gave them the free pass we give to girls and women? Would the world really look any different? Would less get done?"

No, sure, you're right. But it's one thing to know that intellectually and another to walk up to a man and say, "Just hold me, bro, and feel the warmth of my salty tears on your shoulders."

Yeah, I get it. I remember the first time I cried in public as an adult. I was on a plane with my girlfriend, and I knew our relationship was pretty much over. I just started sobbing. I didn't hide it. When people looked at me, I looked right back.

Wow. You weepily stared down strangers? That sounds harder than the crying.

Exactly. A man's instinct is to hide his tears. But I wanted people to know, yeah, I'm a guy and I'm crying. It felt liberating, like casting off shackles.

Even if it were culturally acceptable for men to cry, would we want to? Do men get the same physical and emotional relief that women do?

I think so, yeah. There was a study at Tel Aviv University just last year, which found that the male brain and the female brain are structurally very similar. The way they both function cognitively is almost identical. So a lot of our behavior that we think is uniquely male or female is just social construction. Men avoid crying for the same reasons we avoid being overcome with joy.

We do? How do we avoid joy?

I mean that unconstrained, unguarded joy. When you're just so enthusiastic and giddy that you can't keep it in. For men in our culture, that's a sign of vulnerability. How often do you see guys running around with glee on their faces?

Maybe while playing sports.

Yeah, but that's it. Can you imagine if we acted like that in our everyday lives? My god, people would think you're completely mental. But it wasn't always that way. Men used to laugh more; they used to cry more and smile more.

Really? Because if you look at 19th-century photos, men seem to be mostly scowling.

That's because posing for those old photos took so long. People see them and think men were so hard and severe back then. That's not true. If you look at men's journals at the time, they were every bit as emotional as women were, sometimes more so. It was much more common for men to have very intimate friendships with each other. They shared sadness and joy. There wasn't this stupid notion that crying showed weakness.

So how did we get here?

The social norms changed. This whole notion of the self-made man and rugged individualist came into fashion. It doesn't lend itself to emo-

tional vulnerability. You have to show you're in control, that you've got your shit together.

We want women to think we're in control, or other men?

Both, but that protective nature is strongest with our male friends. We're wary of confiding in each other or showing too much vulnerability because we're terrified of being found out, betrayed, or rejected. I think a lot of guys have this running loop in their heads: "What do they think of me? Do I look like a joke? Do I look weak or foolish?" That fear stops you from showing any real emotion.

Again, that makes sense in theory. But what can we do? Start crying in front of our friends?

Well...

I agree with everything you're saying, but I'm not going to be the guy in an all-male social gathering who says, "Hey, fellas, who's up for some platonic hugging and then crying about our fathers?"

It's an ongoing evolution. You look for ways to be more emotionally honest. I've started drinking more wine in front of guys.

Wait, what? [Laughs.] Drinking wine is more emotionally honest?

You know as well as I do that if you're out with guys and you order wine, it says something.

I thought it said, "I like wine," but now you've got me worried I've been sending the wrong signals.

See, that's it right there. We need to stop worrying about the signals we're sending our male friends. Our friendships are key. We need to get back to the emotional vulnerability our grandparents and great-grandparents had with each other. Guys today have become more isolated and more alienated. If you're a guy, you've been taught that you handle things on your own, that you don't go around confiding in people, and it's a sign of weakness if you seek help. But that's bullshit.

