

# WHY CAN'T I CRY?

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DR. BOB BAUGHER

Question from Sherry on Open to Hope (opentohope.org):

I'm not sure what to say, but feel compelled to write something. My 38-year-old daughter Colleen died May 20, 2008. I spoke to her that morning. She was feeling better than she had for 2 weeks. I was in another state with my younger daughter; she and her husband were to adopt a child and I was helping with their 2 small boys.

Less than 3 hours later, my husband called and said Colleen is gone. She died of an asthma attack. She had asthma all of her life and felt she could handle any situation. Her 2 small children were just coming home from school. The paramedics did not reach her in time.

We had a service and lots of loving people said kind and wonderful words to us. I smiled, thanked them, never shed a tear, and in my mind and heart did NOT believe and still don't believe she's gone. We are blessed to have guardianship of our 2 grandchildren (ages 7 and 9). They make us happy.

Why can't I cry? I start to and then I won't let myself. Four months before Colleen died, my mother died. I didn't cry; but I am so hollow inside. We went thru Hurricane Katrina, lost our home and business, used all of our savings to rebuild our home. I didn't cry.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME!!!?

I am numb. It's like I can't focus on any one thing, my mind just jumps around. The only thing that keeps me going is the children. I am falling apart inside, but outside I look fine. MY DAUGHTER CAN'T BE GONE! IT CAN'T BE! I see her standing in the hall looking in at the children in their bedrooms. Am I crazy??

Please someone give me something to help.

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### DR. BOB BAUGHER RESPONDS:

Dear Sherry,

I am writing to you from snowy Seattle. I've just read your letter and want to say that my heart goes out to you as you cope with so many losses in your life. The death of your sweet Colleen on May 20, 2008 must be breaking your wounded heart in so many ways. I just calculated that Colleen left this earth only 217 days ago; yet you had her for nearly 14,000 days. This means that your brain has thousands upon thousands of memories of Colleen being alive, but only 217 days of her being dead. I'm sorry for the harsh use of the word dead, because it is such a terrible, final word. But it is the one word that our brain tries so much to avoid. Does this make sense?

I want to talk next about crying. You ask, "Why can't I cry?" and then added, "I start to, then I won't let myself. What is wrong with me?" Over the past several years I've frequently been asked to give my workshop on crying at the national conference for The Compassionate Friends. I also co-authored a book with Dr. Darcie Sims called, *The Crying Handbook*. Here are my thoughts on crying. See if any of this rings true with you:

1. When we cry over a loss, it means that our brain is moving forward with the process of letting go of Denial. Understand, I don't mean letting go of the person, but rather letting the harsh reality of the loss begin to sink in. It goes something like this: If I cry, then it means that this loss is real. And if it is real, it will hurt so much I could not bear it. If I don't cry, then part of my brain can still protect itself from the horrible truth that she is gone-and gone forever. And forever is so final that I just can't take it.
2. People in my life need me to be strong. If I cry, I may look weak. My grandchildren need me to step up and care for them. A crying Grandma is not what they need. Therefore, I must not cry for their sake. They've been hurt so much already, I don't want to add any more pain to their life.
3. Another reason that people don't cry is because they have the following belief: If I start crying, I'll never be able to stop. Sound familiar?

Here are some suggestions for dealing with this:

- ◆ **Watch your swallowing response.** Believe it or not, swallowing is directly opposite of crying. That is, the swallowing response is a behavior incompatible with the crying response—you cannot do both at the same time. Sherry, it may be that, as soon as you feel yourself start to cry, you have developed an automatic swallowing response without realizing it. Go ahead and swallow right now. Go ahead, do it as you read this word. See what it feels like? The next time you feel yourself start to cry, do not swallow. This may take a bit of practice, but you can learn to cry again, just as you've learned not to. Okay?
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- ◆ **Find a safe place to cry.** Create a setting for yourself where you can let some tears flow. Here is an example: You may want to do it when the kids are at school. Set aside a half-hour to an hour, more if possible. Do not have anything planned afterwards. Find music that reminds you of Colleen. Bring pictures. Bring an article of Colleen's clothing. Bring a towel and tissues. If there is someone else in the house, inform this person what you plan to do, so he or she will not come in, distract you and interrupt your crying. Go to a safe room, preferably your bedroom. Sit on the bed, turn on the music, look at the pictures (and try to catch yourself from swallowing). If there are other people in your house who might hear you, cry into your pillow. Be gentle with yourself. Don't beat yourself up if the tears do not come easily. Just let happen whatever happens.

Years ago, at The Compassionate Friends national conference, I had just finished with my crying workshop with 60-70 bereaved moms and dads. One of the moms came up and told me the following story:

My daughter died two years ago. Prior to her death I had little problem crying. But, amazingly, since her death I've hardly cried at all. Any guess why?

I explained to her about unconscious swallowing and suggested she watch herself the following evening when we do the candle-lighting and listen to the music that brings tears to the majority of the audience. She said she would give it a try.

The next night, as the banquet ended and the lights came on, a woman came running up to me, saying, "It worked! It worked!" At first I didn't recognize her, but she reminded me, "I was at the crying workshop and you told me about swallowing and it worked. I just finished crying. Not a lot, but I guess that's what I've been doing—swallowing."

Sherry, I give you this mom's story and hope that you report back. You say that you are "falling apart inside." The death of a child absolutely makes you fall apart. Now can you allow yourself to fall apart, at least a little, on the outside? In addition, I hope you have found a support group for you and your husband and a children's support group for the kids.

I look forward to your reply.

Regards,

Bob Baugher

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