

Crying As Revelation

By Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

CRYING CAN HIJACK an office visit. Let me give a recent (partially disguised) example. A retired school teacher came in to discuss side effects from her new diabetes medicine. In response to my innocuous question about her family, her eyes welled up as she told of her daughter's fresh divorce. What was I to do in response? I am experienced at diabetes management and clumsy at secondhand marriage counseling.

For many years in the wake of such outbursts, I would attempt reassurance by minimizing the tear trigger, something like "maybe it will be for the best." Furthermore, when patients apologized for crying (as they often did), I would dismiss the apology with a patronizing "don't worry about it." Anything to get back to the "business" of the office visit. As the years have gone by — and perhaps because I've accumulated my own share of tear-worthy experiences — I now thank my crying patients by explaining that their tears signal that they feel safe enough to cry in my presence.

Crying — the shedding of tears prompted

by strong emotion — is an activity unique to humans. Among other things, it is an opportunity to enhance the bond between people by communicating in a way that the cryer may not be able to muster through words alone. Tears convey both vulnerability and salience. They say, "this is really bothering me" or sometimes, "this is immensely important to me." When my listening skills are attuned, tears prompt me to pay attention as something emotionally potent is unfolding.

My advice? Welcome tears that patients cry as well as the moisture that may well up in yourself in response to their crying. It will be good for the doctor-patient relationship. Imagine that you are making a deposit into a "mutual trust account." And just one more thing: Always keep a box of Kleenex handy. **SDP**



Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988, is on the Biomedical Ethics Committee at Scripps Mercy Hospital and is a longtime contributing writer to San Diego Physician.

An Inventory of Tears

*We cry feeling happy
We cry when we're sad
We cry recollecting
Our mother or dad*

*We cry at the movies
We cry as release
We cry in self-pity
We cry to find peace*

*We cry cutting onions
We cry in the rain
We cry when adventure
Dissolves into pain*

*We cry in the morning
Rising up from a dream
We cry at the genius
Of coffee with cream*

*We cry in nostalgia
We cry in delight
We cry though resisting
With all of our might*

*We cry to surrender
We cry to conceal
We cry in confession
We cry just to feel*

*So welcome the tears
That need to be cried
When a baby is born
Or a friendship has died*

*There's always a note
To the eyes from the brain
It flows with our tears
To expose and explain.*