

CAREER COUCH

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Weeping at Work? Dry Those Tears

Q. You've cried in your boss's office several times: over a dispute with a co-worker, a draining deadline-packed week and a stressful client relationship. It didn't seem a big deal the first time, but your boss is starting to look uncomfortable. How can you dam up the waterworks before you're called the office crybaby?

A. Although many executives extol the business benefits of developing "emotional intelligence," crying at work, over work, is still taboo, said Tom Lutz, a professor of American literature and cultural history at the University of Iowa and author of "Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears" (W. W. Norton, 2001). "In general, it's clear that crying in the workplace is not acceptable," he said. "It's simply against the rules. The office is rationalized space organized around getting tasks accomplished, not processing emotion."

While some company cultures are more accepting of public displays of emotion, you are right to be concerned about how breaking down repeatedly affects your reputation.

Most managers see tears as a sign that you do not perform well under pressure or, worse, that you are being manipulative to get your way, said a senior manager at a major New York public relations agency, who asked not to be named because he did not want to become known in his office as "the guy who makes people cry."

His reaction to a subordinate who cried at work was sympathetic — the first time. "But after you've seen her cry a couple of times, it's hard to take her seriously a third or fourth time," he said.

Q. When you feel the tears starting, what should you do?

A. Get out of your boss's office as quickly as possible, explaining that you would like to discuss the issue later when you're more composed, said Angie Morgan, co-founder of Lead Star, a leadership consulting firm in Fairfax, Va.

Ms. Morgan, a captain in the Marine Corps Reserves with 12 years of experience

in the corps, recalled giving that advice to a marine who once reported to her and had a tendency to become weepy when she critiqued his performance. "Sending him out of my office was the only way to preserve his dignity and set the tone that any productive conversation needed to happen when he was in a different frame of mind."

She said his crying lessened her respect for him and her trust in him on high-pressure assignments. "His tears limited his opportunity for progress," she said.

Q. So how can you stop the crying?

A. Look for the underlying cause. Marcia Reynolds, 49, an independent corporate trainer in Phoenix, says she was a workplace crier for many years, particularly in heated discussions; that did not go over well with her boss at the time.

She eventually determined that her tears were set off when she felt powerless and out of control. "When I felt under attack, I felt like someone was trying to take something away from me — credibility, respect or control," she said. "When I slowed down, I was able to examine whether or not that was true, and if it was, think about what I might say or do to counter that, as opposed to just taking it personally and getting frustrated."

Q. How can knowledge of the cause of your tears change how you react?

A. Understanding your own emotional triggers is the first step to managing them, said Dr. Dana Lightman, 53, a psychotherapist and corporate consultant who says she was known as "Ms. Waterworks" early in her career because she often responded tearfully to criticism from other staff members at the clinic where she worked. She now owns an organizational development firm, Power Optimism, in Abington, Pa.

"You have these hot buttons, and when they're pressed, they take over," Dr. Lightman said. "My own hot button is a sense of feeling inadequate. So when I'm in a situation that stimulates that feeling, I get flooded with emotions that are not really about what's just happened, but about all the baggage I carry around that hot button."

Dr. Lightman noted that with practice,



Chris Reed

one can learn to see an "emotional hijack" coming and choose not to go along. But, she said, wrestling with this process is best done outside the workplace — in counseling or with friends.

"Work is not a place to get your therapy," she said.

Q. Are there other measures that can help solve the crying problem?

Dr. Lightman and Ms. Reynolds suggest role-playing tough conversations beforehand with a friend or counselor so you can observe your own reactions.

Ms. Reynolds also says that taking martial arts classes helped to quell her crying: learning how to stay calm while defending herself physically allowed her to bring that same focus to fending off verbal attacks.

Q. What if you still can't stop crying, despite your best efforts?

A. It does not help to beat yourself up about it, Ms. Reynolds said. She said the first step in conquering her tears was to stop fighting them and to accept that reprogramming her responses might be a long process. In the meantime, she started bringing a Kleenex box to meetings she knew might be intense and announcing before the meeting: "I tend to cry when things get tense. It doesn't mean anything. I will take care of myself."

She said her candor and sense of humor about her tears relieved her colleagues and actually stanching the tears. "Whenever I made that announcement, I never did cry," she said. □

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