



Crying when talking to authority

Question

<p>Dear Alice,</p>

<p>I would like to know why I feel like crying when I speak to figures of authority. It happens most often when there is a serious subject to discuss; however, it has happened when talking about good things, too. It has happened when talking to my parents, grandparents, boss, and teachers. The common factor is that I see them as figures of authority and we are discussing me. I can talk with these people about anything else, but if we are talking about me, I begin feeling the urge to cry. I bite my tongue to distract myself. It is very embarrassing and uncontrollable. The most recent outburst happened when I was asked to describe my strengths and what I need to improve. I could feel myself wanting to cry, but it was still controllable by biting my tongue and speaking in short sentences. However, the teacher began using a soothing tone, asking what I thought because I wasn't saying very much. I was no longer able to control myself and cried. How do I stop this from happening and why does it happen? I am otherwise a very outspoken person and have no issues with public speaking.</p>

Answer

<p>Dear Reader,</p>



<p>It's understandable that this teary situation can be frustrating and stressful. You seem to have picked up on a pattern — tears come involuntarily when you're talking to people in a position of authority who may be evaluating you, even when someone is giving you positive feedback. Know this — your experience is not uncommon and engaging in some self-reflection may help you figure out how to handle these situations. But first, it might be helpful to start with why people cry.</p>



<p>First and foremost, from a biological perspective, tears can help protect and lubricate the eyes. However, crying can also be an emotional response. Why and how often a person cries for emotional reasons can be influenced by a person's cultural background and their gender (e.g., in some cultures it's more acceptable for people to cry than others). The emotions that cause tears to fall can take many forms: sadness, empathy, relief, stress, fear, anger, intense joy, and longing, to name just a few. So why do people do it? Some researchers believe that crying evolved as a way of creating connection and as a way of letting others know that something is genuinely wrong. For additional information on why folks shed tears, take a gander at the

American Psychological Association's <a href="

http://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/02/cry.aspx" class="ext-additional">Why People Cry.</p>



<p>Back to your situation: your emotional response could be the result of a number of triggers, including anxiety during the interaction, self-consciousness, or embarrassment at the attention. What are you thinking about when you're talking to authority figures? You say you have the urge to cry, but what other feelings are you experiencing besides the embarrassment you mention? You could also consider how your feelings differ when talking to peers versus when talking to authority figures. If your peers share those same thoughts about you, do you react the same way? Understanding the feelings that may be triggering the tears could be the first step in figuring out how to stop them.</p>



<p>When being praised, consider asking yourself if any of the following thoughts or questions go through your mind: I don't deserve this. If they really knew me, they wouldn't be saying these things. Can this possibly be true? What if their approval is only temporary? What if I disappoint them later? If any of these thoughts or questions sound familiar, it's possible that you may be evaluating yourself more harshly than the authority figures who are giving you praise. In other words, getting positive feedback could feel "too good to be true." What's it like for you to have your positive traits or progress pointed out by others? Do you feel relieved at being noticed? Does it feel scary? Is it hard to take in? These feelings could be the cause of your urge to cry.</p>



<p>Similarly, think about observing your own internal thought patterns and emotions when an authority figure is giving you critical feedback. The following thoughts may trigger tears: I'm losing their approval. I'm a total failure. They've lost respect for me. They no longer like me. Sometimes, those feelings can become exaggerated as you replay the interaction or anticipate further criticism. This may lead to crying.</p>



<p>So, what to do about it? As previously stated, consider approaching your tears with a sense of compassionate curiosity to get a sense of your internal world in these moments. Ask yourself gently, what is this about for me? The act of nonjudgmental self-observation could help alleviate the response or reduce the urge to cry in the moment. If you know you're going to be talking to an authority figure, you could make a list of topics you want to talk about ahead of time, and this list could give you something to focus on if you start to feel the urge to cry. Additionally, talking with a mental health professional may help you to determine the cause of your tears, as well as how you could decrease your urge to cry when talking with an authority figure.</p>



<p>Take care,</p>

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