

Do Real Men Cry?

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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Recent research shows both men and women share similar emotional feelings. While emotions can be interpreted differently between genders, a [University of Michigan study](#) sought to dispel biases when describing women or men as “emotional.”

Super Bowl LVII between the Kansas City Chiefs and Philadelphia Eagles featured many compelling story lines. One of those was the battle between brothers Travis and Jason Kelce, who played for opposing teams. The Chiefs won the game, but an underlying theme in the moments and days after the game was the two brothers publicly conveying raw emotions. During a podcast they jointly host, the brothers spoke through tears about how Super Bowl LVII was more than just a game to them.

“You’re crying after the game, and they’re not tears of sadness. They’re tears of joy,” Jason said.

Jason said the moment he got really emotional was the moment he saw his mom, Donna. There were countless headlines about the fact that two grown men cried passionately about their family.

Another social media post, this from star quarterback Tom Brady announcing his retirement from professional football -- this time for good, also drew extra attention as Brady can be seen holding back tears as he thanks all the people who have helped him on his journey.

Joe Siegel is a licensed clinical professional counselor with OSF HealthCare. He says the power of any adult showing emotion is important.

“It’s hard to think about just emotions without just thinking about a broader term we usually refer to as ‘emotional intelligence.’ Emotional intelligence involves not just being able to recognize and identify what you’re feeling, but also being able to understand what other people might be feeling,” Siegel said.

Siegel says emotional intelligence, or lack thereof, can impact our socialization skills.

“It helps us understand what is motivating us to do certain things. Broadly, all of that helps us with socialization. Sometimes the socialization might be the most important thing that gets impacted by an emotional expression which can be problematic,” says Siegel. “If someone is often angry, there might be a group of people who don’t want to spend time with them. As people try to regulate the anger, it can go in odd directions. You can think of a positive direction it can go. You’re feeling this thing, so I work out, go running, or do something to regulate my body.”

While there are positive things we can do to respond to the emotions we’re feeling, there are also responses we can have that are unhealthy.

“Maybe my emotions are being regulated through substance use. Or through isolating, or avoiding. These things have broad impacts on our health. Not just because of what we’re doing, but how it affects the way we’re able to be with other people,” Siegel says.

He adds “When we bottle them {emotions} up, that usually means we’re wearing some sort of mask. We’re presenting ourselves in a way we’re not actually feeling. Anytime we do that, we wear a mask, which doesn’t accurately reflect what’s going on inside of us. That’s a stressful situation for us and that stress causes a stress response in your body that increases inflammation and has chemical issues that develop. I think sometimes when people think about the physical health part, they think about that tension that’s created between the mask and the reality. But probably the bigger impact is on other things in our life.”

Siegel offers some tips for showing emotions, and the benefits we can receive from doing so. He recommends reflecting on our emotions through questions like “Why am I feeling this way?” And “Was there a triggering or activating event that caused me to feel this way?” He adds that finding solutions helps us build relationships, not isolate, and move forward with our lives.

So how can an emotionally intelligent father impact the children they’re raising?

"You're helping your child understand how to be with other people. To be with other people, we have to be able to imagine what they're feeling. To do that, I need to be able to understand what I am feeling," he says. "You're also helping them understand that making decisions for ourselves is not purely an emotional state of mind, it's also not purely a rational state of mind. Good decisions about what we want to do, connect with our feelings, values and beliefs. It's not simply trying to make the most rational decision."

But Siegel says this goes much further than just fathers.

"Over the past decade, most studies have shown that most men and women are expressing fewer emotions and their range of emotional experience has been reduced. That means, it's a problem for both groups of people."

His advice for showing emotion?

"Be kind to yourself. Because we learn how to express emotions from other people," he says.

Siegel also says to be patient.

"Never think to yourself that 'I shouldn't be feeling a certain way.' Your feelings are there. It's hard not to think about your feelings without thinking about your thoughts and the behaviors that spring from those thoughts and feelings," he added.

He also says that while strong emotions can overwhelm us, look for underlying emotions you're feeling simultaneously.

"I'm angry, but at the same time I feel disappointed. Or I'm sad at the same time that I'm lonely," he says.

So how can our loved ones help support us through different emotions?

"Patience, number one. Because it's a skill, we're just learning it. It's helpful to use your empathy. What might they be feeling? When you do that, you're never telling someone that they shouldn't be feeling something, but it's OK to ask open-ended questions," Siegel says. "Try to help them explain it in more specific language. There are a number of tools you can find online to help people find the exact word."

Siegel referenced the Wilcox Feelings Wheel which was developed in the 70s. It's composed of 6 primary feelings: mad, sad, scared, joyful, powerful, and peaceful. It is then surrounded by 2 circles containing secondary feelings that are related to the primary emotions.

He says listening to your body is a great indicator of how you're feeling,

"Because, sometimes, if we don't know the right word, we can arrive at what emotion it might be by how your body feels. Sometimes, that's how people move forward with what they're feeling, not so much cognitively recognizing that I'm feeling whatever this emotion is. It's like, oh no, I can feel it in my body," he says.

Lastly, Siegel says it's never helpful to tell someone how they should be feeling.

"People are just going to feel what they're feeling at any given moment. They don't have a lot of control over that," he concluded.