

# THE POWER OF FEELING YOUR FEELINGS



GRIEF COURSE

DR. DAVID PAGE

## THE POWER OF FEELING YOUR FEELINGS

Grief Course

Week 3

*"You can't heal what you don't feel."* – John Bradshaw

The second need we have as griever is to feel our feelings, to express our emotions. God is our creator and giver of emotions. He designed for us to feel our feelings. Feelings are an emotional state or reaction. They are vibrations of energy. I use feelings and emotions interchangeably. Feelings include being sad, happy, angry, weary, or sorrowful. There is a power found in feeling our feelings – to feel all the feels.

### **Don't Bury Your Feelings**

A hundred years ago, industrialists thought they could bury toxic waste and it would just go away. We've since learned that doesn't work. Rather, the waste leaks into the water, contaminates the crops and kills animals. Burying grief does the same thing. It leaks into our emotional system and wreaks havoc. It distorts our perceptions of life and ruins relationships.

It's important to feel our feelings and not to bury them. As a rule, our culture doesn't do a good job of teaching us how to deal with emotions. It's intriguing to identify what you were taught about feelings as a child. As a boy I was taught, "big boys don't cry." As high school basketball player I was told by my coach "not to show emotion and not to talk back to referees" even if they make a bad call. Essentially, I was taught to stuff my emotions.

The idea that emotions should be stuffed was woven deep into my subconscious. I decided this understanding of emotions didn't serve me well as an adult. The death of my daughter forced me to examine my beliefs about emotions and to rewrite my own narrative about my feelings.

I love the Tom Hanks movie *A League of Their Own*. A classic line is when Hanks proclaims, "There's no Crying in Baseball!" In real life, some people, in particular men are told not to cry. I'm here to tell you that's terrible advice. Don't let a macho stereotype prevent you from crying and experiencing your subsequent healing. Crying, whether you are a man or woman is actually very beneficial. I've learned to cry after my daughter passed. The good news is it really helps.

People fear if they really feel their feelings, they will open Pandora's box of pain and that it will never end. This parable from Greek mythology, that you don't want to open a box that could bring worse pain and suffering on you is just that, a myth. I remind grieverers that we are IN Pandora's box. We are experiencing pain and suffering in the moment.

We often forget the point of the parable. What remained after Pandora's box was opened was HOPE. Hope was also in the box along with the trouble and pain. Hope is found when we feel our feelings and express our emotions. The hope that no feeling is final, you won't cry forever, and when your feelings are felt they are then released.

**Feel All the Feels**

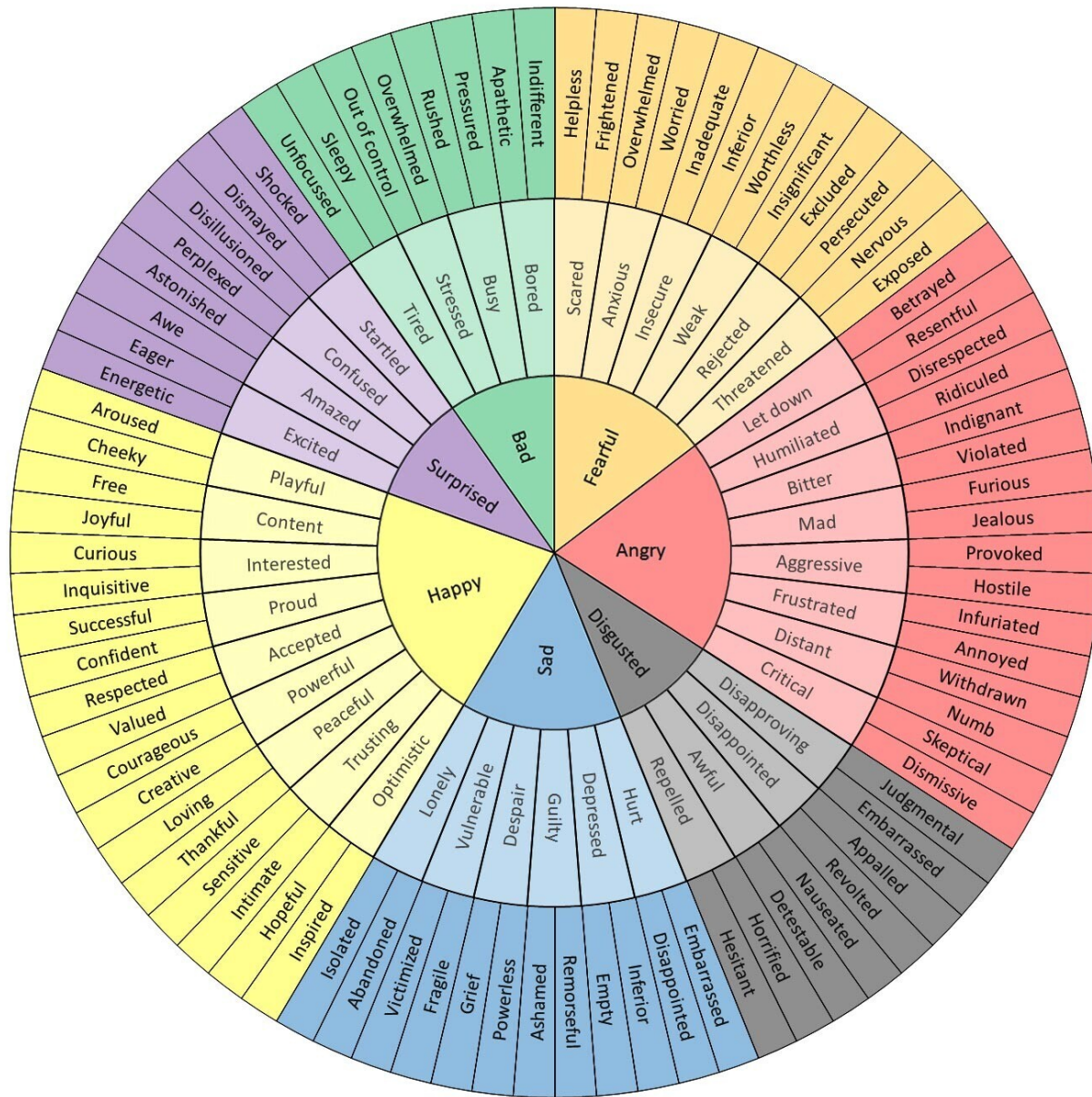
The key is to feel your feelings. Feel them. I guarantee it's going to hurt, but every moment you're weeping, you're doing the work. Every moment you're hurting, you're healing. The only way out of the pain is through.

When you're grieving, you experience a wide variety of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Your emotions may seem strange, but they are a true expression of where you are at the moment. Rather than denying your feelings or being victimized by them, learn to recognize, and learn from them.

Trying to *just keep going* suddenly didn't work anymore. I needed a different strategy. I needed to learn how to grieve. Author John Bradshaw said, "*We cannot heal what we cannot feel.*" If we don't name it, we can't feel it. And if we don't feel it, we can't heal it.

Naming your feelings and acknowledging them are the first steps to dealing with them. It's the process of becoming friendly with your feelings that will help you heal. Feelings can be harsh so it's important to be kind to yourself in your grieving process.

Check out the Feeling Wheel below:



Find a place to be quiet and alone with your thoughts and feelings. In these moments of solitude, learn to check in with yourself about the loss. Ask yourself, "What am I thinking about feeling right now about this loss?" Allow your thoughts and feelings to surface without judgment. Look your grief in the face and say, "Hello to it." (Dr. Alan Wolfelt - Blog: *Exploring Your Feelings* - Center for Loss - November 16, 2016).

Inevitably, when I ask a griever how they are doing, they begin sharing their grief story. It becomes an overpowering and repetitive pattern. My job as a pastor and counselor is to get them to connect with how they are feeling *today*, at this very moment.

My goal is to empower grievers to discover their feeling language and voice. Grieves often teach me about grief by explaining what they are feeling and experiencing in their soul. Grievers need space and empowering to express their feelings and trust those feelings.

### **Express and Release Your Feelings**

In order to express and release our feelings, we need to allow room for them to come out and be open to processing them. If we don't express our feelings and continue to suppress our emotions, they will find their way out in other ways. Unfelt feelings don't just go away. They resurrect like a zombie in a horror movie.

Your emotions are data for your experience of life. If we ignore or repress our feelings, not only will they come out later, but we miss vital information about the origin of those feelings. I had a great deal of anger after my daughter's death. I needed to feel it, express it, and get it out. I punched a pillow and screamed a lot. We all need to find ways to express and release our feelings. When Forest Gump lost Jenny, his wife and love of his life, in the movie *Forest Gump*, he began to run across the country to deal with his grief. My wife began running after Jackie died. She went on long runs to combat the pain.

The goal is to allow our feelings to be and not to resist, but instead, to move through them. Psychiatrist Carl Jung taught that whatever you resist persists. The more you resist anything in life, the more you bring it you. Resisting feelings and avoiding potential pain is actually bringing more pain upon yourself. When we don't feel fully, we can't live fully. We must grieve fully to live fully. Our minds want to protect us from the pain and distress, but feelings must be felt.

Life is a series of peaks and valleys. When you are in the valley of grief, don't fight your emotions but acknowledge your reality and feel your feelings. It's messy and it's uncomfortable, but if you don't deal with your feelings, you will get stuck in your grief and in managing problematic behavior. Feelings are your friend, connect with them. Remember God is with you in the peaks and valleys in life and will give you the courage to feel your feelings.

### **Embrace the Pain**

"There is ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance"  
Solomon (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4)

"Pain is a gift," according to Dr. Paul Brand, a British surgeon and author of *The Gift of Pain*. "Pain is one of God's great gifts to us." (Brand, Paul and Yancy, Philip). That's the last thing grievors want to hear after their loss. Many people view pain as one of God's biggest mistakes. Prior to my loss, I never viewed pain as a gift, but I do now.

Pain is a gift because it demonstrates we have a capacity to feel. Pain informs us that we are still alive. What if we couldn't feel things in our body and soul? God created us with the ability to feel pain for a reason.

Dr. Brand's work with leprosy patients in India revealed that pain is an indicator that lets us know something is wrong; pain has a value that becomes clearest in its absence. Leprosy is a deadly disease because it keeps the nerves from informing the brain about the pain. While most diseases are feared because of pain, leprosy is lethal because its victims feel no pain. In villages where Dr. Brand served, lepers reached directly into fire to retrieve a dropped potato, they simply couldn't feel the warning signals telling them to stop.

Pain is a gift that none of us want and yet none of us can do without. Pain is both an essential and unavoidable part of life. A key to navigating grief and loss is learning how to respond to pain.

We often seek to avoid our painful feelings or go underground with them and bury them.

I called the coroner and the mortuary a couple hours after our Jackie died. The coroner arrived first and confirmed and certified Jackie's death. He listed the immediate cause of death on her death certificate as cardiorespiratory arrest due to a glioma brainstem tumor. In other words, her little heart and lungs just gave out.

Two men from the mortuary came to our house next. They parked the van at the bottom of our driveway and walked up to our house. It was time to take Jackie to the van. "We'll go get the gurney to carry her down to the van," one of them said. "Guys, she's forty-two inches tall and only weighs about fifty pounds. How about I just carry her down to the van instead?" I replied.



They agreed it was a good idea. I picked up her little body. Rigor mortis had begun to set in. With Carrie by my side, I carried her body down to the van, and laid her inside. The van drove down the road on St. Andrews Court, turned left onto Birch Way, and disappeared into the distance with our baby.

We watched as they took our little girl away. We stood there for what seemed like hours but in reality, was just a few minutes. We were in shock. Tears welled up in our eyes. We felt so helpless, so hopeless. Nothing in life prepared us for a moment like this. We had experienced a catastrophic loss and knew we were in deep weeds and needed help.

The pain was excruciating. I didn't know what to do, where to turn or how to deal with my pain. I called a Christian counselor in town to begin grief therapy. She shared with me the importance of expressing my emotions. She explained that God made our bodies to feel pain and that grief was a natural part of life. She encouraged me to process the pain I was feeling inside by crying into a pillow. She also gave me grief homework to do.

I remember curling up in a fetal position and crying. I cried so hard and for so long I didn't think I could cry anymore. I was cried out. For a while my tears just wouldn't come out. My tear ducts dried up. I had never experienced such a thing. I asked the counselor about it, and she said not to worry, they would flow again when they were ready. And sure enough, they did.

A few months after Rick Warren's son died from suicide, I asked him if he had experienced the same phenomena? He said he had. At one point he couldn't cry for a week while he was in Rwanda on a mission trip but when he returned home the tears came back.

I remember screaming into my pillow to release the pent-up anger inside. It was ugly. I screamed at the top of my lungs. I made guttural sounds I'd never heard myself utter before. It was like my soul was verbally vomiting and letting go of all the toxic stuff inside.

I remember howling like a wolf at the universe. I was crying so hard that I collapsed on the floor. I got up and looked in the mirror only to see my swollen eyes, tears on bright red cheeks, and drool running down my mouth. I was dehydrated, unable to stand, think, or walk. Sentences were hard to put together and didn't make sense. It was easier and more satisfying just to let out sounds come out that had no meaning.

I went back to the therapist for another appointment. I informed her that this grieving stuff was hard work. She smiled and said, "Yes, it is." I told her I didn't think I was doing very well. She asked what my biggest challenge was. I shared that I was having nightmares every night of the two men from the mortuary driving my daughter away in the van. Each time I dreamed about it I would wake up in a cold sweat.

"What can I do to get rid of the nightmares?" I asked.

"Try reframing the situation. Instead of picturing two men taking your daughter away, imagine two angels coming down from heaven and gently taking Jackie home," she said.

Now that sounded good. I gave it a try. The nightmares continued. I knew I needed further help.

I remembered a book I read called, *A Grace Disguised* by Jerry Sittser. On a lonely stretch of highway in Idaho, Sittser had his world suddenly torn apart. It happened in an instant. A drunk driver claimed the life of his wife, daughter, and mother, when he slammed head on going eighty-five miles per hour into the minivan Sittser was driving. Three generations of women in his life were killed before his eyes. When I read his story, I felt as if someone kicked me in the gut.

After Jackie's death, I heard Sittser speak online at a large church as he shared about joy he discovered after his loss. After days, months and years of agony, Sittser found hope through God in the midst of his pain; he was ten years out from the accident at the time.

I didn't just want a book. I needed a person, someone with skin on it. Someone I could relate to who had gone through catastrophic loss like I had. I wondered about my options. What if Jerry would come speak at our church to help our church family deal with the grief process?

Is that a selfish desire? I was desperate. I wanted to meet, get to know, and hang out with Jerry. I was looking for a model, someone who had been to hell and back and could talk about it. But how would I reach him?

At the time, Sittser was a professor of at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington. He has a Ph.D. in church history from the University of Chicago and specializes in the history of Christianity, Christian spirituality, and religion in American public life.

I called Whitworth University, they put me through to his voice mail and I left a message. The next day he called me back and we talked about my loss. Toward the end of our call, I asked if he would fly to Sacramento and speak at our three church worship services on an upcoming Sunday morning.

"I wish I could, but I have a one-year waiting list for speaking engagements and I hardly ever share about my loss in public forums. I normally lecture on the history of Christianity. The speaking engagement at Willow Creek was a unique situation," he said.

I was silent on the other end of the phone. "By the way, how long ago did you lose your daughter?" he asked.

"Jackie died two weeks ago in my arms," I replied.

"*Two weeks ago?*" he emphasized. "I thought it was two years ago. I'm so sorry to hear that. I want to help you frame your loss. Let me talk to my kids and see if they are okay with me coming to your church in the next few weeks. I'll call you back in a few days," he said.

I was hopeful he might just come.

He called back and said he would love to come help our church and me deal with grief. Word spread in our community about Jerry coming to our church. I planned a seven-week sermon series called, "How to Handle Life's Hurts" with Jerry kicking off the series with "How to Survive Suffering."

I was so excited he was coming to our church, as was Carrie, our staff, and our whole church. He spoke in all three services, and I listened to his message three times. I hung on every hope-filled word that came out of his mouth. I still remember him smiling on many occasions during the message and thought, maybe that will be me some day.

After our last service we went to a member's house for lunch. It was a beautiful home situated on the lake at the Lake of the Pines. When we confirmed Jerry was coming to speak at our church, we decided to begin a grief support recovery group. Fifty people joined us for lunch and Jerry spoke to the newly formed grief recovery group after lunch. I was shocked at how many other people had lost loved ones as well. Truth be told, I formed this group for me, but my pain was now helping other people. I was grateful for that unexpected outcome.

After lunch, I drove Jerry back to the Sacramento airport. On the way, I shared about my recurring nightmare of watching the two men from the mortuary take my daughter away and disappear. I shared about the advice given by the Christian therapist of picturing angels coming to take her away.

"How is that working for you?" he asked.

"It's not. I still have nightmares about it almost every night," I said.

"That crap didn't work for me either," he said.

We burst into laughter together. I was surprised by his reply, but thankful for his honesty.

"Dave, you have to embrace the pain. You must feel the feelings in order to get better," he said.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"When the drunk driver hit our minivan, it was carnage, just awful. My four-year-old daughter died immediately from a broken neck. My wife was seriously injured but was still alive as was my mother. They both died a few minutes later. My six-year-old son had a broken femur and almost died, but thankfully survived. My other two kids were dazed, crying, and screaming but were relatively unhurt. It took an hour before the emergency vehicle even reached us," he said.

I was speechless as he shared the tragic details.

"You have to go back and relive the event in your mind and face your fear and watch those two men drive away with your daughter. As crazy as it sounds, you embrace the pain. You feel the feelings all over again and let them sink in," he said.

My first thought was, this sounds counterintuitive, but he certainly knows what's he's talking about, so why not give it a try? I'd had an emotionally traumatic experience of seeing two men taking my daughter away in a van. I chose to relive the experience again and to feel the painful emotions associated with the experience. In my mind, I pictured the two men driving my daughter away from our home. I felt a piercing pain deep inside. I sat with my pain and let it marinate. I stayed in the moment and felt the feelings and welcomed the pain streaming through my body.

I named my painful emotions and owned them. I felt my feelings to the core of my being despite the unpleasantness. I confronted the experience head on and felt a sense of dread over the finality that my daughter was gone for good.

That experience reminded me of diving beneath huge ocean waves as a boy, being tossed back and forth in the whitewater. Holding my breath and feeling helpless from the power of the wave to do anything except to go with the flow. Although scary, I was able to come up for air and breathe again. I was going to be okay.

After embracing my pain, facing my fear, and feeling the emotions, my nightmares disappeared.

### **Does God Hear My Cries of Sorrow and Grief?**

When we are hurting and grieving a significant loss, we may wonder if God is listening? We may shout to him, "Do you hear my cries?" I cried all the time after Jackie died. I also cried out to God in my grief. *The* sadness didn't seem to go away. No other human being may hear or understand cries of sadness, but God does.

The Scriptures affirm God hears our cries, cares about what makes us hurt, and understands us and our circumstances even better than we do. We find comfort in the truth that God will never dismiss our grief as unimportant.

God listens to us and answers our prayers:

"I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears. Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces. In my desperation I prayed, and the Lord listened; he saved me from all my troubles. For the angel of the Lord is a guard; he surrounds and defends all who fear him" (Psalm 34:4-7 NLT).

"The righteous call to the LORD, and he listens; he rescues them from all their troubles.

The LORD is near to those who are discouraged; he saves those who have lost all hope" (Psalm 34:17-18 GNB).

"Listen to my words, Lord, consider my lament (groaning). Hear my cry for help, my King, and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly" (Psalm 5:1-3 NIV).

"I waited patiently for the LORD's help; then he listened to me and heard my cry. He set me safely on a rock and made me secure" (Psalm 40:1-2b NLT).

### **What Should I Pray?**

In our sorrow and grief, we often don't know what to pray. That's okay because the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27 NIV). God shows us what we ought to pray through the power of the Holy Spirit which dwells inside us.



## Jesus Wept

Jesus was fully divine and fully human. He knew what it was like to feel his feelings and express his human emotions. His dear friend Lazarus died. Friends of the family were sitting Shiva with Lazarus' sisters, Mary, and Martha. Sitting Shiva was an emotionally and spiritually healing time for seven days where mourners would sit in the presence of a friend and not say anything. There just aren't words for some pain.

If the person wanted to talk, then you could converse. It is a way of saying, "I love you, I'm here for you, you're not alone." You might sit for hours or days. "When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33 NIV)

"Where have you laid him?' he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. (John 11:34 NIV).

*"Jesus wept."* (John 11:35 NIV).

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" (John 11:36). Jesus' tears were evidence of his love for Lazarus.

The shortest verse in the Bible is one of the most freeing verses in Scripture. Those two words, "Jesus wept," give us permission to weep in our sorrow because they reveal how Jesus modeled his grief. Grief is not a disease, it's a natural response to loss.

Jesus ends up raising Lazarus from the dead and yet he still weeps. His power does not rule out his grief. His ability to raise the dead doesn't rule out the pain and sorrow in his heart. You can have great faith in God and still weep. In fact, I believe spiritual maturity goes hand-in-hand with tears.

"I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears," said King David (Psalm 6:6 NIV).

Jesus has a profound sorrow, ache, and sadness in his heart. He feels his feelings head on and weeps. Jesus spends no time speculating why. I don't know why my daughter died from a brain tumor that wasn't even in her head three months before her diagnosis. I may never know. I know evil and disease run rampant in our world. Be suspicious of anybody who gives you simple answers to complex questions.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's that whatever you're feeling in that moment it is okay. It's okay to feel anger, shock, denial, or fear. It's okay to have no answers, and no explanations, and even no words.

Don't ever let anybody take your grief away from you. In some religious traditions there is a perception that weeping and mourning means that you doubt God, so people aren't encouraged to grieve. Please don't ever think it's more spiritual to hold in your tears.

I don't know how long ago you experienced your loss or if it was just last week, but I'm so sorry for your loss. But please don't avoid your feelings and think they will just go away. There is a high cost to holding onto your feelings. Loss brings pain and pain brings grief. "Pay me now or pay me later, but you will pay," cries grief.

If you've never freely grieved, those feelings are still inside. Allow yourself time to mourn and weep. If you try to hold in your tears and ignore your pain, there will be serious problems later. God gave us tears to shed in our grief, an outpouring of our inner pain. Jesus has power over life and death. He knows the beginning from the end. Jesus knew that a few minutes later he would raise Lazarus from the dead, call him out of the tomb so that he would live again, and yet Jesus still weeps.

I think people all over the world and throughout history would be well-served by watching Jesus weep. It might give them permission to weep and to fully grieve. Weeping is the language of the soul.

If the Son of God needs a good cry, then maybe so do I. And maybe so do you.

### **Health Benefits of Tears**

Crying is a phenomenon unique to humans, and is a natural response to emotions, from deep sadness and grief to extreme happiness and joy. In essence, tears are liquid emotions. Our bodies produce three kinds of tears: reflex, continuous, and emotional. Each kind has different healing roles. Reflex tears allow your eyes to clear out noxious particles when they're irritated by smoke or exhaust. Most people cry reflex tears when cutting an onion because onions produce a chemical irritant.

Continuous tears are produced regularly to keep our eyes lubricated. They contain a chemical that functions as an anti-bacterial and protects our eyes from infection. Normally, after crying, our breathing, and heart rate decrease, and we enter into a calmer biological and emotional state.

Emotional tears have special health benefits and are especially relevant to us as grievers. Biochemist and tear expert, Dr. William Frey, discovered that emotional tears contain stress hormones that get flushed from your body through crying. Crying stimulates the production of endorphins, our body's natural pain killer and feel-good hormones. Bottom line, crying is good for you. It's healthy and it makes us feel better.

In addition to physical detoxification, emotional tears heal the heart. Crying is essential to resolve grief when waves of tears regularly come over us after loss. Tears help us process the loss so we can keep living with open hearts. Otherwise, we are prone to depression. *Adapted from Dr. Judith Orloff's book "The Empath's Survival Guide: Life Strategies for Sensitive People (Sounds True, 2017).*

While the eyes of all mammals are moistened and soothed by tears, only human beings shed tears in response to grief and sadness. Animals do feel emotions and do create tears, but only to lubricate their eyes, not in response to grief. God designed your body with the capacity to cry and provides health benefits with every tear, so feel your feelings and let your tears flow to help heal your heart and soul.

### **God Collects Our Tears in a Bottle**

King David said, "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book" (Psalm 56:8 NLT). The idea behind keeping our tears in a bottle is remembrance. While God may not have a literal bottle filled with our tears, he does remember every tear that falls from our eyes. This includes every tear we shed with the passing of a loved one. Our tears matter to God, and he remembers them all. The fact that God remembers my sorrow and tears brings me great comfort.

But God does not merely collect tears. The tears of suffering humanity cause God to be deeply moved. They call him into action, to restore that which has been lost, to rescue the brokenhearted, to usher in a new creation in which every tear shall be wiped away from their eyes (Revelation 21:4). Tears are temporary, someday they will all be wiped away. Sadness will be turned into joy, mourning into dancing. All things will be made new.

**THE END**

Contact:

[DaveP@Saddleback.com](mailto:DaveP@Saddleback.com)

[Hope4Grief.com](http://Hope4Grief.com)

[Saddleback.com/Grief](http://Saddleback.com/Grief)

# Vivamus vestibulum ntulla nec ante.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.

Sed egestas, ante et vulputate volutpat, eros pede semper est, vitae luctus metus libero eu augue. Morbi purus libero, faucibus adipiscing, commodo quis, gravida id, est. Sed lectus. Praesent elementum hendrerit tortor. Sed semper lorem at felis. Vestibulum volutpat, lacus a ultrices sagittis, mi neque euismod dui, eu pulvinar nunc sapien ornare nisl. Phasellus pede arcu, dapibus eu, fermentum et, dapibus sed, urna.