

The tears of a therapist

How often do therapists cry in therapy and does it matter? For a profession that trades in emotions, you'd think these questions would have been tackled before. But as Amy Blume-Marcovici and her colleagues point out in their new paper, the issue has been strangely neglected. There's been plenty of research on crying medics, yet all we know about crying therapists comes from an ethics paper published in the 1980s (56.5 per cent of therapists said they'd cried in front of



In *Psychotherapy*

a client), and an unpublished qualitative study of 10 psychodynamic psychotherapists for a doctoral thesis completed in the 1990s.

From their survey of 684 US psychological therapists – 75 per cent women; age range 22 to 85; 35 per cent CBT, 23 per cent eclectic with psychodynamic emphasis, 19 per cent eclectic without psychodynamic emphasis – Blume-Marcovici's group found that 72 per cent of the sample had cried in therapy ever. Among these criers, 30 per cent had cried in the last four weeks.

Looking at the correlates of being a therapist who cries in therapy, it was older, more experienced therapists and those with a psychodynamic approach, who were more likely to be criers. Surprisingly perhaps, female therapists were no more likely to cry in therapy than male therapists, despite the fact that they reported crying more often in daily life than the men.

This mismatch between crying in everyday life and crying in therapy was a consistent theme in the survey. Older therapists cried less often in daily life than younger therapists, despite crying more in therapy. Also, whereas crying in daily life is typically associated with negative emotion, in therapy it was associated not just with the therapists experiencing sadness (reported by 75 per cent during their last therapy cry), but also with 'feeling touched' (63 per cent), warmth (33 per cent), gratitude (15 per cent) and joy (12 per cent). 'This suggests that tears that occur in the therapy situation are different in nature than tears shed in daily life,' the researchers said. However, it's worth noting that, at their last time of crying in therapy, the therapists believed their clients were experiencing negative emotions like sadness, grief and powerlessness.

Therapist personality was only weakly related to crying, with openness being the most relevant trait. More agreeable and extraverted therapists also showed a

tendency towards crying more. The personality questionnaire used in this study was extremely brief, so it's tricky to read too much into these results. Ditto for therapist empathy, which showed an association with crying tendency, but not frequency or proneness, possibly due to the limitations of the empathy scale that was used.

This research provides no objective data on the effect on clients of having a crying therapist. However, the therapists belief was that their crying was either inconsequential (53.5 per cent) or that it had changed their relationship with their client for the better (45.7 per cent). Less than one per cent felt it had harmed their client. Referring to the literature on therapist self-disclosure, the researchers speculated that perhaps therapist crying has a positive impact when the therapist-client relationship is already strong, but can threaten that relationship when it is weak or negative.

Blume-Marcovici and her colleagues called for more research on this neglected topic, and particularly for future studies to investigate the effect of therapist crying on client outcomes. They said their initial results are 'meaningful' because they challenge the idea that 'therapist crying in therapy is occurring due to the therapist being overwhelmed by intense negative emotions that arise in therapy, and instead signals a moment of potentially positive emotional connection, even if amid painful negative affect'.



Rituals bring comfort even for non-believers

In the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*

People around the world often perform rituals as a way to cope with sad events. The rules can be contradictory – for instance, Tibetan Buddhists think it's disrespectful to cry near the deceased, while Catholic Latinos believe the opposite. Beneath this variety, a new paper by Michael Norton and Francesca Gino, suggests there is a shared psychological mechanism – a comforting sense of increased control. Moreover, the researchers report that even non-believers can benefit (pdf via author website: tinyurl.com/c52uz3h).

Norton and Gino began by asking 247 participants recruited online (average age 33; 42 per cent were male) to write about a bereavement they had experienced in the past, or a relationship that had ended. Half of them were additionally asked to write about a coping ritual they'd performed at the time. The main result here was that the participants who recalled their ritual reported feeling less grief about their loss. This was explained by their greater feelings of control, and wasn't to do with the simple fact they'd written more than the other participants.

Relying on reminiscence in this way is obviously problematic from a research perspective, so for a follow-up Norton and Gino invited 109 students to their lab. Groups of 9 to 15 students were told that one of them would win a \$200 prize, and to intensify the



The scourge of meeting late-comers

In the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*

situation they were asked to write about what it would mean to them to win, and how they would use the cash. One student was duly awarded the money and left. Half the remaining participants were then instructed to perform a four-stage ritual: they drew their feelings about losing on a piece of paper, sprinkled salt on the drawing, tore it up, then counted to 10. The others acted as controls and simply drew their feelings on the paper.

The key finding was that the ritual students subsequently reported experiencing less upset and anger than the controls at the fact they hadn't won the money, and this was largely explained by their greater feelings of control. Crucially, the comfort of the ritual was unaffected by how often participants reported conducting rituals in their lives or whether or not they believed in the power of rituals. It seems there's something about the process of going through a multi-stepped procedure that provokes in people feelings of control, above and beyond the role played by any associated religious or mystical beliefs.

A third and final study was similar and clarified some issues – reading that some people sit in silence after a loss, and then sitting in silence themselves, did not bring comfort to participants who lost out in a lottery for \$200. Reading that some people perform rituals after a loss also brought no comfort, unless the participants then went on to perform a ritual themselves.

Tardiness at meetings is one of the biggest unexplored issues in workplace behaviour, according to a team of researchers in the USA. Steven Rogelberg and his colleagues attempted to estimate the base rate of meeting lateness via a survey of 195 employees across South-eastern USA, reporting on over 300 meetings. Participants admitted arriving late an average of 5 per cent of the time. Multiply by the number of attendees at a typical meeting (the average in this sample was eight) and this makes the odds of a single late-comer high and helps explain the finding that 37 per cent of meetings on average started late.

Less satisfied employees, the less conscientious, younger employees, and those with a dislike for meetings, all tended to report being late more often. Job level was not related to (self-confessed) tardiness.

Does it matter if a person arrives late? The researchers said it has a negative impact on both the late-comer, who is often judged to be rude, and the rest of the team. Most participants reported experiencing negative feelings when someone shows up late, including frustration, feeling disrespected and upset. This is bad news, the researchers said, because 'negative mood states can negatively impact performance'. If you consider that an estimated 11 million meetings occur in the USA each day, and that \$37 billion is lost annually thanks to unproductive meetings – the role of meeting lateness could be massive.

Part of the problem is that people vary in their definition of lateness. In another study, Rogelberg's team surveyed 665 international participants (average age 37) and just over a fifth of the sample defined lateness as arriving after the scheduled start time (which was the objective definition used in the survey into the base rate of lateness). Another fifth defined lateness as a certain fixed time after the scheduled start – in other words, they were allowing for a 'grace' period, varying from a few minutes to more than 10 minutes. Thirty-two per cent defined lateness as arrival after the meeting had actually got underway. Some (6 per cent) defined lateness simply as 'keeping others waiting', or 'interrupting the flow' (5 per cent). A minority (3 per cent) saw lateness in terms of whether a person was 'ready to go' once the meeting had started.

The participants were also presented with a range of set

scenarios and asked if these were an incidence of lateness. Although most people considered arrival five minutes after the scheduled start as lateness, responses here also showed how much social factors come into play. For instance, far fewer people said they would consider themselves late if they arrived five minutes after the scheduled start time, but other people had yet to arrive and those already there were still chit-chatting.

The study has some obvious weaknesses, including a reliance on memory and self-report, and the emphasis on Western attitudes to time.

'In light of the frequency, consequences, and conceptual complexity of meeting lateness, along with the dearth of extant research on the topic, it is a phenomenon primed for further study,' the researchers said. 'This study was an attempt to energise such research as the potential appears vast.'



The material in this section is taken from the Society's **Research Digest** blog at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog, and is written by its editor **Dr Christian Jarrett**. Visit the blog for full coverage including references and links, additional current reports, an archive, comment and more.



Subscribe by RSS or e-mail at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog



Become a fan at www.facebook.com/researchdigest



Follow the Digest editor at www.twitter.com/researchdigest