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When is it appropriate to cry on the job?

Never really, unless you're being escorted out

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There are few things more uncomfortable than witnessing a colleague cry at work. It makes everyone uncomfortable.

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I know because I have cried at work more than once. I was fresh out of college and working in a testosterone-driven environment and I cracked under the pressure. It felt good for me to vent. It was cathartic.

I still love to cry - and it remains cathartic. I love to cry at weddings, funerals, and sappy, old movies. If I see someone cry, I usually cry with them, as no one should have to cry alone. But crying at work is another story.

Our society allows for women to cry more than men. There is a lot of buzz in corporate America about emotional intelligence (EI). Those who exhibit high EIs are deemed better employees, managers and executives.

How much emotion is acceptable? Not too much.

The truth is, crying at work can be detrimental to our careers. Especially for women, as we can be seen as emotionally weak and incompetent. Interestingly enough, it can be a different story for men and actually work to their advantage in some situations.

According to Julie Bauke, President of Congruity Career Consulting, men who tear up or cry can be perceived as self-aware and sensitive while women can be seen as emotional and manipulative.

I conducted my own unscientific study by asking friends and family their thoughts on employees crying at work. The consensus was that women who cry were viewed as weak and manipulative while men were seen as sensitive and responding appropriately.

So when is it appropriate to cry at work?

Bauke says there are times when crying is an expected and appropriate response, such as when losing your job. However, it is not appropriate to cry when not getting the much anticipated and expected promotion.

Studies show that "tearing up" at work is perceived much more positively than "crying" at work. My advice would be not to do either. Sometimes,

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once those flood gates open, it can be difficult to stop. Should you feel yourself welling up at work, I recommend excusing yourself as discreetly as possible to compose yourself, and returning once you have regained your composure.

When we cry at work, we give others the opportunity to question our emotional stability and our strength. Women, in particular, already have so many stereotypes to overcome to be taken seriously and fit into the traditional corporate mold that we don't need to create more obstacles to our success.

Jill Haney's Cincinnati-based business, JH Image Consulting, conducts individual and corporate group training on appearance, behavior, and communication. She is a certified image consultant with the Association of Image Consultants International. Reach her at 513-505-2732, jill@jhimage.net, or www.jhimage.net.

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