

Moved to tears: Workouts and waterworks

Sometimes motion may trigger unexpected emotions

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When we think of physical activity bringing someone to tears, it's generally in connection with torn hamstrings, sore shoulders, the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat.

But sometimes exercise may release a surprising slew of pent-up emotions, according to fitness instructors and psychotherapists who have seen or heard about clients crying during yoga, Pilates or other body-mind classes.

"We use our bodies to physically tense up against pain or negative experiences," says Karol Ward, a therapist in private practice in New York City.

"Then someone is in a movement class doing downward dog and that emotion can come to the surface," she says.

In response to reports of workouts that bring on the waterworks, Ward published an article earlier this year in the IDEA Fitness Journal to educate fitness instructors on how to respond when clients melt down in class.

One of Ward's patients was in a Gyrotonic session when she broke into tears after a move that arched her upper back and shoulders, where she holds tension. Before realizing the trigger was emotional, the instructor thought her client may have been injured.

In the field of "body psychotherapy," Ward and other therapists maintain that the body holds on to feelings, even if it seems the mind has dealt with them. "So if a person has the opportunity to relax that area, whatever has been held there can come to the surface," Ward says. "The body wants to complete the emotional experience."

'Turning inward'

That's one possible explanation. Another is that body-mind exercise simply encourages people to contemplate life more.

A retail executive and mother of two boys who asked to remain anonymous said she experienced an "emotional flooding" during yoga sessions she took when her husband suffered a bout of depression, began drinking too much and had an affair.

As a long-time jogger, she believes it's the meditative aspect of yoga that brought on the tears in a way that jogging or other activities never did. "There's a real turning inward of yourself" with yoga, she says.

Rochelle Rice, a fitness instructor in New York, says she's seen people cry for a variety of reasons and during a range of activities.

One woman who had a hip replacement cried at the end of her first mile-long walk after the surgery. "She really was feeling back to normal, she called it. What I observed is a return to self," Rice says.

Another woman actually left a Pilates mat class and threw up because she was so emotional, Rice says. The woman had experienced the death of two family members and the birth of a child after a long bout of infertility. She hadn't been very active through it all and when she started back up she had the strong reaction.

"It was like the body had shut down," says Rice, "and the motion brought up all that emotion." Rice referred the woman to Ward, the psychotherapist, for counseling. (While crying during exercise can ultimately be a stress-reliever, sometimes people need professional help outside of class to deal with issues, experts note.)

Some yoga centers are now geared at using movement to help people cope with their feelings and heal. At the Samarya Center for Integrated Movement Therapy in Seattle, Molly Lannon Kenny, a yoga instructor with a background in speech pathology, offers classes for people who have experienced loss, and those with anxiety disorders, ADHD or chronic pain.

She believes heavy emotions are like tight hamstrings that loosen up when someone gets moving.

"It's our belief that those emotions [such as grief and loss] get stuck in our bodies and that emotions have physical manifestations," she says, such as cloudy thinking, loss of coordination, tension, shortness of breath, and sleeping too much or too little. "We think of the broken heart and the broken mind but we don't think about the broken body."

Healing tears

Nancy Stillger, a nonprofit consultant in Seattle, took a class at the center called Yoga After Loss to help cope with the death of her premature daughter, Maria.

Stillger says the experience led to tears for a few reasons. "It's the combination of leaving your body in a pose and the compassion of the [instructor's] touch and being surrounded by

people who had experienced loss," she says. "With yoga it's a time to reflect when you're holding a pose."

But her biggest emotional experience during exercise came at the end of a 60-mile, three-day breast cancer walk in September, which she embarked on to honor both Maria and an aunt with breast cancer.

"I cried the whole last two miles," Stillger says.

But they were healing tears.

"I was very angry at my body," she says. "I kind of blamed it on the loss of my daughter. So doing something that physical and with the good cause, I really felt like I got my body back and that I was emotionally reconnected with it and that I could love it again. It took two years and a big walk."

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