

# WHAT IF I START CRYING AND I CAN'T STOP?



by Carolyn Spring

'It's okay,' she says, but of course I don't believe her.

So I look at her, this therapist, and dare her, with my eyes, to prove it. She has seen this look before, many times. Early on, she used to rise to it. Then she realised that to win this battle she has to stay out of the battle. So she waits. She is good at waiting.

I hadn't realised until therapy how many games I played. Because, to me, they weren't games. They were just how things happened. The way things were. The way you relate to people. I hadn't realised that you pick up these strategies during childhood. I hadn't realised that there are other ways to relate, sometimes better ones. I hadn't really realised anything. Therapy is that process, long and slow and hard and cringing, of realising the games you play.

Eventually I relent. 'It's not okay,' I say, surlily, like a teenage part of me is speaking. 'If I start crying, I'll never stop.'

I hadn't even realised that I believed this. It sounds silly once I say it out loud, but so much of my behaviour, so many of the ways that I approach each and every situation in life, have revolved around this silent, odourless belief: that feelings are overwhelming and that feelings are out of my control.

I wonder what she is thinking. I used to struggle with her silence, convinced only and always of her hatred for me. But lately I've begun, in some small measure, to mentalise: to be able to imagine, at least in part and if only partly accurately, what she might actually be thinking, rather than what I assume, from my previous experience of other attachment figures, she *must* be thinking. So in her silences I



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remind myself that she is allowing me space to think; that she doesn't want to dominate; that she wants me to feel safe enough to think and feel, and to do so without pressure.

'But no-one ever cries forever,' I say, only realising this as I speak it. Of course. Even when I've been *really* upset, even when the tears have poured like a river bursting its banks, I've only cried for a while. An hour maybe, rarely more. The emotion wears itself out.

'Emotions move,' I say, echoing her words to me from years previously. 'Emotions have motion. They don't stay the same. So if I let them come, they might feel overwhelming for a while. But then they'll pass. They *will* pass.'

She nods slowly, pulling the muscles up around the corner of her eyes into what I imagine should be a smile, but right at this moment I can't read facial features. It's never been my strong point. In the intensity of a therapy session, I often lose the ability altogether.

*Is it true, though?* I ask myself, internally. This is what so many sessions are like for me: the outward conversation, with the therapist. The inward one, with myself. Or rather, with my *selves*. It took years for me to learn to tune in to the dissociated parts of my self. I switched, they took over, and I had no sense of it happening. It was as if the centre of my consciousness had stepped into a different room, and I was left alone in silence: suspended,

unthinking, unfeeling, unexisting. Until that centre returned and I realised that time had passed and things had happened, things had been said, things had been done, and I had no awareness of it. The dissociation back then was overwhelming, and complete. It had taken many years to join the dots enough for me to become aware of my parts, to tune in to my parts, to communicate with my parts, but without switching to my parts. It was still an effort.

*If I feel these feelings, is it true that they will pass? Or will they overwhelm me?* I direct my question internally, as I've learnt to.

Inside I feel suspicion. *Is it a trick?* This is my Switch part, sensitive, alive, visceral, relational. 'He' (the closest pronoun to fit 'his' sense of self) fears rejection. He feels things deeply. His emotions are always close to the surface, but never shallow. He does gut feelings in a way that I never could. He sounds the alarm. He is our look-out. Sensitive and deeply empathic, Switch is a very valuable, very vulnerable, part of me. The therapeutic relationship means everything to him, and so ... suspicion.

He is afraid, as always, that it is a trick. I prod a question at him, on the inside, wanting more detail about his concern. *Is it a trick?* he says, or rather thinks, again. There is an edgy, antsy prickliness about it. Then the words come thick and fast, tumbling over one another, melding into one another, a stream of emotion: *We'll*



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*feel it, this feeling, we'll feel it, and we'll get upset, and then she'll hurt us, she'll humiliate us, she wants us to cry so she can tell us how pathetic we are, it's a trick, it's a trick, we shouldn't do feelings, we shouldn't show them to anyone, it's not safe, if we feel our feelings, she'll hate us, she'll send us away, she'll say we're too much, she won't let us come any more, she'll...*

His fears spin into a circle like the end of a hot wash. Most of this, as usual, is transference: imposing on the therapist what we've experienced from others, pattern-matching previous relational encounters and predicting the same for the future. It is good, defensive, back-brain work. But it isn't thought-through. The front brain isn't engaged. It's a valid fear – because people *are* dangerous sometimes. But it's a generalisation: *my mother mocked me for having feelings; my mother was a woman; you're a woman; you will mock me for having feelings*. And it's catastrophising: *if I have feelings, you will hate me and send me away and refuse to let me come back ever again because you will find me completely overwhelming*.

I remind myself to breathe. Switch's anxiety is churling up through my ribs and clenching tight around my throat.

I realise that time is passing. I suspect she understands I am having this internal debate, but I don't know for sure.

'If I feel feelings...' I offer, letting her know that I am still in the room, still engaged,

but just working something through. Another voice, on the inside. Or rather an emotion, surfing into mind on a rip-tide of thought. *She's going to hurt us. Get away*. It is stern, and authoritative, and I feel I should obey it. And right next to it, a smaller voice, giddy with terror. *Please hurt us*. I have a double-take. There's no 'don't'.

I used to think this was me going mad. I used to be terribly, terribly ashamed at this intermingling of apparently random thoughts and feelings and ideas, as if it meant there were loose wires in my head and I was hearing interference from another line. But nowadays, I know what is happening, and I know that it is sane. I just need to tune the knob. Every communication makes sense. Everything has its genesis somewhere. I'm not mad. I'm sane enough to be attuned to what *all* of me thinks.

'If I feel feelings...' I try again, and slowly, I push through the noise: 'If I feel feelings, there's a part of me who's afraid that you'll mock us and humiliate us and reject us. And there's a part that thinks you'll use it – use our vulnerability somehow – to hurt us. And then there's a part that actually *wants* you to hurt us.'

She's heard this before, but I think it always comes as a surprise, being so contrary to her thought and intention.

'Why do they want me to hurt them?' It is said with sadness, not incredulity.



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Six voices, all at once. I close my eyes, frowning to concentrate. Time passes. 'So they can be close to you. Because being hurt is the only way to be loved.'

'Aah yes.' She nods knowingly and sympathetically. 'Infanticidal attachment.' We've been here before: that part, clingful, needy, believed pain was a requisite for connection to another human being. It resulted in a broken hand in a session a while ago. It took a long time to learn that pain and real love don't go together.

'And partly because that's what they expect. But that's not what happens now - not here.'

'No.'

I get a sudden wave of frustration, that time is passing and we're moving at the pace of a dead snail and nothing, really, is getting resolved. The emotion must flash somehow across my face, because the therapist picks up on it and says, 'So what do you think now? Is it dangerous to feel your feelings?'

'It feels dangerous,' I admit, acknowledging the voices on the inside. 'It feels terrifying. Because it always was. It was never safe to feel feelings. The only defence we had, when the abuse was happening, was to hide our feelings. If we'd shown them, it might have made things worse. They might have hurt us more. They might have exploited it. And it was the only thing

that was ever private...'

I trail off, realising the importance of that. I dwell on it for a few moments. Everything has gone still on the inside, like they're all waiting and listening too.

'They can do what they do to you, but if they can't see what you're feeling, they can't really get to you,' I explain, almost to myself. 'I've never realised it before, but hiding my feelings was super-important. It was a way of cocooning myself away from the abuse. They're invading me, violating me, hurting me - but they don't know what I'm thinking and feeling. They can't reach the real me.'

The room has gone entirely still as if the walls are listening too. Even the therapist seems to have stopped breathing.

'So what's happening is awful, but it's happening somewhere else - on the outside. Or to another part of you. But they're not getting anywhere near your feelings. They can't see them. You're never, ever going to show them those.'

She nods, wanting to encourage me, not wanting to interrupt me.

Go on, says a voice on the inside. I feel like I'm speaking for them.

'But that was then. This is now.' There is an ache that I cannot possibly put into words, of the child who suppressed so



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many feelings as protection against unspeakable malice. 'The upside is that I protected myself emotionally. The downside is that I never stopped hiding my feelings. I lost touch with them. I grew up not knowing how to do them. And now I'm afraid of them. They feel so huge.'

'It feels that if you start crying, you'll never stop?'

'Yes.'

I am sitting in sadness.

'And will you?'

For a moment, I don't understand. I look at her, enquiring.

'If you start crying, will you never stop?'

Like so many fears, as soon as I name it, it loses its power. It was a bully in the darkness.

'No,' and I half-laugh at the thought of crying tomorrow, and the next day, and next week, and at Christmas, and Easter, and all through the summer holidays. The headaches, the snot. Oh, the snot! I know it won't happen.

'No,' I say again and some of the sadness has lifted with my momentary amusement. 'I'll cry and it'll be painful and then I'll have a headache and feel tired, but the tears will stop.' I omit the snot.

'So you're not really afraid of the crying being uncontrollable?'

That was what I started with, but now as I think about it I realise it's a screen.

'No, I'm afraid of what might happen if I'm vulnerable with my feelings. If that means that people will hurt me. If that means you'll find me too much. Lots of things. But it's not really that I won't be able to stop. It's more how people will respond to me.'

She nods, and I nod to myself, on the inside. *There, I've said it. I've named it.* And nothing bad has happened.

There's silence for a bit, and then the therapist leans forwards slightly, eyes narrowed, serious.

'Crying is a social signal for support,' she offers.

My thoughts swerve to the side to accommodate this new idea. 'Pardon?' It's not that I didn't hear. It's just that the thought hasn't penetrated my head far enough to produce meaning.

'Crying is a social signal for support, not just a catharsis of emotion.'

She's saying this for a reason, not just to state facts. She never says anything just for the sake of it. There must be a connection here. If only I could think...

'Crying...'



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Suddenly I realise that I'd only ever seen crying as that thing you do because you can't control it. That it comes out of nowhere. That it serves no purpose. That it's a vicious beast whose aim is to destroy you, or at the very least to humiliate you. That you're standing by your uncle's graveside and the air is thick and heavy with people's grief and *crying* wants to slit open your throat, but you have to resist it. Under no circumstances must you let it win. You have to push it down, conquer it...

I'd never thought of it as a positive before.

Even the 'catharsis' bit ... I'm not sure about it. Right there, in that moment, in the therapy room, I've still got an edge of my mother about me and I want to despise it. *What good is catharsis? Just pull yourself together, get a grip, move on ...* But I'm willing to allow it, for this moment. Or at least not to argue with it.

But the big idea: 'a social signal for support'. What does this mean?

I push my thoughts together until they start to coalesce. *By crying, we're asking for help from other people.* I recoil at the thought, albeit temporarily. I'm also entranced by the possibility. What is the therapist saying? That it's okay? That it might be okay to ask for help, for support? That crying is a way of doing this?

Another voice on the inside sounds the warning: *It's a trick.* I sigh. Here we go again. Again, more firmly: *It's a trick.* I wait. *She's not saying it's a good thing,* the voice continues. *It's a bad thing. Crying is a social signal for support. It's a signal of weakness. It's a signal that you are vulnerable and people can come and hurt you.*

Suddenly, I'm irritated by myself, at the constant bent towards negativity. *Not everyone wants to hurt everyone, I counter, brusquely.*

And, not realising I'm talking out loud, I say it again: 'Not everyone wants to hurt everyone. So for some people it's okay to cry. You're letting them know you're upset. And that gives them the opportunity to come and comfort you. It's pro-social. It helps bonding.' I have lapsed into science talk, to make the idea feel safer, but I'm still heading in the right direction. 'It's not manipulative. It's normal. It's a way of getting support.'

I notice the therapist and realise that she's wondering why I'm trying to convince her.

'I'm talking to myself,' I explain and she smiles, but in a way that feels okay.

There's a quizzical feeling on the inside. Parts of me aren't convinced, but they're not resistant either. It's a new thought. A big thought. Maybe feelings are safe to feel. They won't overwhelm. They won't last forever. They're a signal to receive



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help. With safe people, they're good to show.

A sudden wave of exhaustion.

'Enough for today.'

'Enough for today,' I agree, relieved at least that we've only talked about crying and I haven't actually had to do it. So far, only parts have cried in session, while other parts have beaten them up for it. We have a long way to go.

And I leave with more to ponder. More new ideas, more insights into this world after trauma. Is it right? Could it be? Could there really be this world where people aren't out to hurt each other? How do I know? How do I stretch forwards, bravely, into this brave new world, whilst honouring the fears of my parts? *Enough for today*, I remind myself, and I almost feel like I'd like to cry. *If I do cry*, I say internally, *it won't last forever. If I do cry, it won't be forever.* They're not entirely convinced, but they don't argue. That's enough for today. •

