

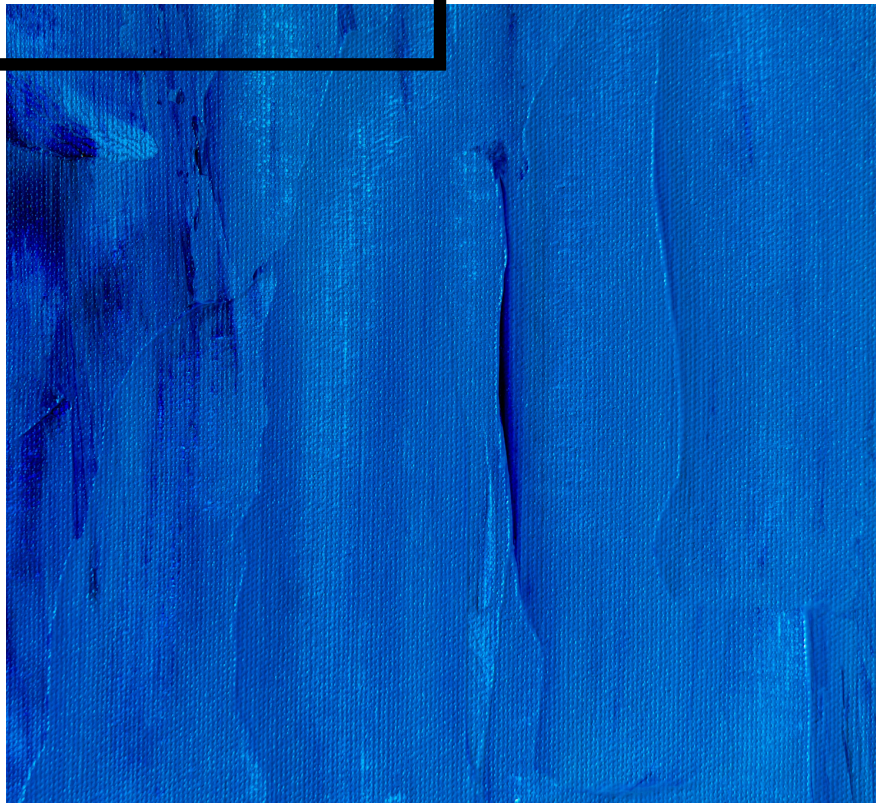
LEARNING TO LAMENT- LETTING OURSELVES FEEL NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Words by Dr Kate Middleton

Negative emotions do need to be felt. They are designed to be short term signals to highlight to us that something important is happening. But the more we suppress them and try to hold them down the more they build up and start to feel like something more. Their job is to get our attention - to make sure we don't miss out on processing something important that has happened, or might happen - something with implications for us or people we love or things we understand about the world and how we live. So when we try to ignore them that urgency grows. Like blowing air into a balloon the more air we hold in the balloon the more the pressure builds. And the greater that pressure and the longer this goes on, the greater the fear (and likelihood) that if we let it, it will all burst out in a very messy and uncontrolled way.

And there's another important risk if the only thing we know to do with these kind of emotions is hold them in. If you keep blowing air into a balloon, a very great tension grows as the pressure grows. You start to feel you might burst with all you are holding. Maybe there are times when something does bubble over, revealing itself as frustration or emotional outbursts you regret and wish you had not had. OR times when you are on your own and emotions engulf you, when you are most vulnerable and tired, feeling out of control and desperate. When things like this start to happen there's a risk people get drawn into strategies to try to manage those emotions - things to try to forget and distract like drugs and alcohol, things to try to release pain like self harm, or things which are desperate attempts to make changes to something that might help like eating disorders. So many emotional and mental health problems and addictive behaviours have their root in a desperate attempt to manage unpleasant emotions that have built up with nowhere to go.

So how do we deal with them? How do you intentionally and safely release and express the least welcome emotions like grief, sadness and loss? What do you do if an emotion feels so powerful that allowing it headspace might mean it overwhelms you - that if you start you might never be able to stop? How do you avoid meltdown in times of intense and unbearable emotions like grief?



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The Bible is full of characters who encounter desperate and emotional situations. What is interesting is that it never models an approach to them which is about suppression. Instead we see time and time again characters who find ways to process what they are feeling and share it - often with God. They do not keep things in. In fact often the decision to express is very deliberate. Lamenting is an old testament practice which describes the intentional and often creative expression of difficult emotions, and its behind not just some passages but even an entire book! The new testament too contains many examples of characters making a conscious decision not to bypass their emotions, but taking time to let themselves feel.

So what can we learn from all this about how to manage our own feelings in a pressured time? Here are 5 tips for how to let yourself feel:

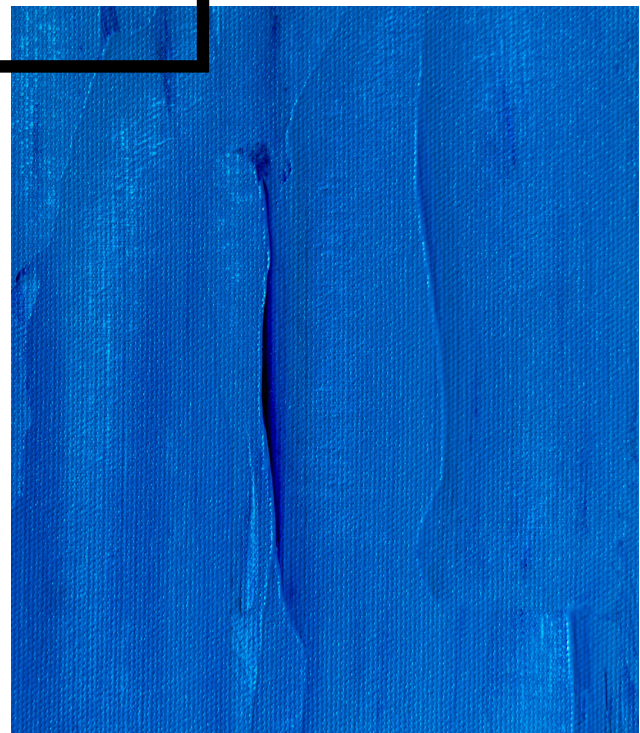
1. Accept and admit that you have difficult feelings

Many great examples of lamenting in the old testament come from the life of David. David was a character anointed as king by one of God's prophets, but his journey to that position wasn't going to be simple because there was already a king, Saul, who inevitably felt the threat of this young pretender to the throne, and persecuted David, eventually resulting in his having to flee out of his own country.

David ends up isolated from his land and people, leading a band of other men also in tricky and difficult situations: a band of outlaws and misfits who eventually settle in the territory of the Philistines. In 1 Samuel 30 we read of a tragedy that hits David and his men: whilst they have been away fighting for the Philistines, their home camp has been raided, and all their women and children taken prisoner. They get back to find the camp destroyed and deserted.

In this moment David is the leader - and it is a crisis. Surely a time for a cool head: deal with those emotions later? That might be our 21st century model of leadership. But no - the story tells that David actually did something we might find surprising. He leads his men in a group outpouring of grief. It reads like a deliberate moment not just of acknowledging but ensuring those feelings are very much out in the open - in fact the story tells that he and his men wept until they had no strength left to weep.

Its easy to think in our culture that strength is about not feeling but you don't have to be a superhuman, emotion free robot when life deals you tough blows. Its ok to feel. One of the most important parts of self compassion and self care is to admit when you are feeling rubbish and to take steps to manage those feelings.



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2. Crying is important

So what do you do when the worst happens and your reaction threatens to overwhelm you? Another thing we see in the bible is that characters often openly cry - something else we don't do so much in our culture, where there's often a pressure not to weep - especially (though exclusively) for men. I spend a lot of time with people expressing their sadness through tears (as my kids have been heard to say more than once 'Mummy is always making people cry!!) and the most common thing people do when they do cry is immediately apologise. But why do we feel that crying is such a bad thing?

There's a fascinating story about crying in John 11. Jesus is travelling to his friend Lazarus' house having heard that Lazarus has not just fallen ill, but tragically died. But Jesus seems to know something else about what is going to play out in this story, telling the disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep (a figurative term for death) but he, Jesus, is going to go and wake him up.

So, Jesus arrives, in a story that will end in him raising Lazarus from the dead. But Lazarus has been dead 4 days, so he and the disciples are greeted by a wall of grief from Lazarus' family and friends. And not just sadness - there are other emotions in there: anger and resentment that had Jesus come sooner maybe Lazarus would not have died. And in the midst of all this Jesus does something really strange - when you bear in mind he knows he is about to raise this man from the dead and replace all that grief with relief and celebration. John 11:35 is a starkly simple verse: it just says Jesus wept.

But why? Why cry Jesus? Why not just get on and heal him? What this story teaches us is that clearly there is an important purpose in tears. There's a significance in this moment that Jesus takes the time to allow his grief expression. And it's interesting that some of what we know about tears backs up their having a functional role: science tells us tears of grief and sadness have higher levels of certain hormones and waste products produced in times of stress. So there may be a biological purpose to the emotional release of tears - and of course crying is also a strong communicative signal between us which helps us generate support and care from other people. Maybe we need to stop seeing it as a weakness and work on our ability to let ourselves cry.



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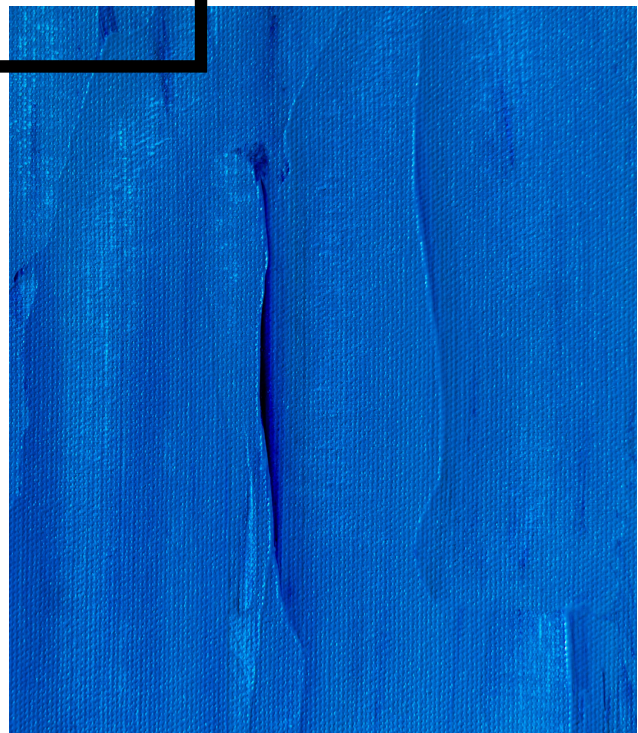
3. Don't lament alone

So its important we admit we feel rubbish and crying is a good thing. But that's probably not how it feels if you have just cried yourself to sleep on your own at night, or howled in the agony of isolation, or grieved a loss without anyone being able to comfort you. The presence of other people in our moments of powerful emotions is very important - and this is one of the biggest challenges of our current situations. I have spent far to many hours already in this covid crisis trying to comfort people remotely over the phone or facetime, or zoom, and it is awful. We are not designed to do life on our own - and life's toughest times bring out our instinctive reaching for one another.

It's so important we don't feel like we can't share these more rubbish moments in life. So many of the stories in the Bible clearly show people sharing their emotions with one another. Did you know that there are cells in your brain which fire when you are with someone going through a powerful emotion mirroring the way your mind would react were you experiencing it yourself? Empathy is not just a theoretical thing - we are hard wired to share one another's emotions. So in 1 Samuel 30 David weeps not on his own, coming back to his men when he has pulled himself together, but with them. In John 11 Jesus doesn't retreat somewhere and have a bit of a cry then get on with what he is there for - he joins in a collective outpouring of grief.

The bible is clear, you are not designed to do difficult times on your own. Whatever life is throwing at you, share it: Romans 12:15 says "Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down." (The Message). So when times are tough find a friend you can be honest with. If that is too hard in person - powerful feelings can be hard to express with other people, and it takes practice, think about other ways to express what you're feeling - write a text or a letter or use creativity to express what you are going through. But do share it.

And don't forget God - he is big enough to handle your tears. The psalms are full of examples of people pouring out their grief to God - and full of expressions of how that helps. Psalm 56:8 says "You have stored my tears in your bottle and counted each of them." God doesn't just hear your tears, he holds them, records them, responds to them. Psalm 34:18 "If your heart is broken, you'll find God right there; if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your breath." Sharing your feelings with God can be a part of finding a way through.



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5. Boundary how and when you share or express

The final tip then is about how you avoid being overwhelmed. The fear of this happening keeps many people from letting themselves feel, and it is understandable: emotions can be frightening particularly when they have built up over time. If this is where you are don't despair - but do recognise that it may take some time and some practice and even some expert guidance to help you learn to process what you are feeling. This is particularly the case after trauma when our own minds can fight with the instinct to keep safe from emotions which have genuinely been too much to handle.

Ultimately one of the values of therapy is that it creates a safe space where you can let yourself feel: a totally separate room in your life which you enter to work through difficult things before closing the door on them again and returning to your everyday. This allows you the time and space you need to express - and ensures you do that safely with someone who can hold what you are dealing with - but also makes sure that time is limited and that you won't run into those emotions when you least expect it.

However therapy isn't the only way to boundary how and when you feel. Think about other ways you can create clear times and spaces where you feel. You might want to journey to somewhere to take a moment to express difficult things. I am a great lover of cycling and some of my rides have pause spaces where I often stop and take a moment to pray and process things when I need to. In this difficult time your allowed exercise might offer you a chance to get to somewhere which gives you a space to feel - a space away from those everyday challenges.

Time is also a great boundary - and lamenting is all about intentionally choosing periods of time when you will express. The important thing is to have an end time as well as a beginning. You can even set a timer - bizarre as it sounds - and decide to give yourself an hour for expressing, and then making a plan for what you will do afterwards to pick yourself up and get on with life.

But remember - all this is better not done alone. where you can take that time to pray and share with God - and if possible share it with other people. As a church we're starting every day with a half hour of prayer together in a prayer group - and some of those times include really powerful and helpful moments of expressing tougher feelings and things we're sad about together. Or grab a moment with one or two friends - it doesn't have to be verbal - text can work well - to share and pray together. Then share together also that moment of getting up and getting on.

Most important of all: Get help if you need to

