

The Strength in Tears: Unmasking Emotional Intelligence

Richa Chadha, MBA, MS; ICF-PCC, ACTC

For years, society has conditioned us to believe that hiding our tears is a sign of strength. From childhood, many of us heard phrases like, “Don’t cry, be strong,” or “Crying won’t solve anything.” The unspoken rule was clear: strength lies in stoicism, not vulnerability. Yet, this myth does more harm than good, leaving countless people disconnected from their emotions and, ironically, weaker in the face of life’s challenges.

Emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our emotions—is the true measure of strength. It’s about knowing when to hold it together and when to let it out. But how do we shift a cultural mindset that equates tears with weakness? The answer lies in stories that show how embracing emotions can lead to transformation.

I once coached a CEO who admitted, with great hesitation, that she cried in her car after every tough board meeting. She described these tears as a shameful secret, one that made her feel inadequate as a leader. When I asked why she felt that way, her voice broke, “Because leaders are supposed to be strong, not fall apart.”

As we worked together, she began to see her tears not as evidence of weakness but as a reflection of her care and commitment. She was crying because she deeply valued the people she led and felt the weight of her responsibilities. Over time, she learned to channel that raw emotion into conversations with her team, sharing her struggles in ways that inspired trust and collaboration. Her tears became her greatest strength, a bridge to authentic leadership that connected her with others on a human level.

On the other end of the spectrum was a young man named Raj, who came to me feeling numb and detached from life. He rarely showed emotion, believing it made him “unshakable” and “resilient.” But inside, he felt hollow. Raj had lost a close friend years ago, but he never allowed himself to grieve. “Crying wouldn’t bring him back,” he said flatly.

Our work together was slow and deliberate. I encouraged Raj to write letters to his friend that he would never send, to say out loud the words he’d bottled up for so long. One day, in a session, he broke down sobbing. It was the first time he had cried in years. And while it was painful, it was also freeing.

Raj later described the experience as shedding an invisible armor that had weighed him down. By allowing himself to feel the grief, he could finally begin to heal. Emotional intelligence, for Raj, wasn’t about controlling his feelings but allowing them to flow through him without fear.

These stories reflect the essence of emotional intelligence: recognizing emotions, accepting them, and using them as tools for growth rather than signs of failure. When we hide our feelings, we deny ourselves the chance to process and learn from them. Suppressing emotions doesn’t make them disappear; it buries them deeper, where they fester and emerge in harmful ways—anger, anxiety, or even physical illness.

On a personal note, I remember a moment when I faced my own myth of emotional stoicism. A few years ago, I experienced a devastating professional setback that left me feeling like a failure. My instinct was to put on a brave face and push through it. But late one night, as I recounted the incident to a close friend, I burst into tears.

I cried for the opportunities lost, for the doubts that crept into my mind, and for the weight of expectations I felt I hadn't met. It was messy and uncomfortable, but it was also healing. By acknowledging the depth of my disappointment, I was able to move forward with clarity and renewed purpose. That night, I learned that strength isn't about holding back tears; it's about letting them teach you something.

The irony is that hiding emotions often takes more energy than dealing with them. It creates a façade that distances us from others and ourselves. In contrast, emotional intelligence invites us to lean into discomfort, to feel deeply so we can live authentically.

For example, consider a mother who suppresses her frustration to maintain a calm exterior for her children. While her intention may be noble, over time, those unexpressed feelings can boil over into outbursts or withdrawal. But if she can identify and articulate her emotions—"I'm feeling overwhelmed because I'm trying to juggle too much"—she not only models healthy emotional regulation for her kids but also creates space to address the underlying issues.

Acknowledging emotions doesn't mean acting on them impulsively. Emotional intelligence involves striking a balance: recognizing feelings, understanding their source, and responding in ways that align with our values. It's the difference between snapping at a colleague when we're frustrated and pausing to communicate our concerns constructively.

Our emotions are messengers. They tell us what matters, what needs attention, and what deserves celebration. Tears, in particular, are a powerful signal. They can mean sadness, joy, relief, or even awe. Each tear holds a story, and each story holds the potential for growth.

Imagine a world where leaders, parents, teachers, and friends saw vulnerability as strength. Where tears weren't a source of embarrassment but a symbol of courage. This isn't just wishful thinking; it's the future we can create by normalizing emotional intelligence in our lives and communities.

In my journey as a coach and mentor, I've seen the transformative power of emotional intelligence time and again. It's not about "fixing" people or erasing their struggles but helping them embrace their full humanity. And in doing so, I've learned to embrace my own.

Strength isn't the absence of emotion; it's the presence of courage to face it head-on. So the next time tears well up in your eyes, don't fight them. Let them remind you of your resilience, your passion, and your capacity to feel deeply. Because in those tears lies the strength to heal, grow, and lead with authenticity.

