

SCIENCE &amp; WELLNESS

# Let Your Kid be Sad – It's Good For Them Sometimes

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[July 18, 2017](#) ([July 18, 2017](#))

I can clearly remember listening to Melissa Manchester's song "Don't Cry Out Loud" as a child back in the 80s. Those lyrics have been etched in my brain all these years: "Don't cry out loud. Just keep it inside, learn how to hide your feelings."

Well, that is actually terrible advice, according to science.

Now we know it is okay to be sad and to cry once in a while. In fact, sadness is beneficial to our mental health and part of what makes us fully functioning humans. According to psychologist Jonathan M. Adler in a recent "Scientific American" article, "Acknowledging the complexity of life [including sadness] may be an especially fruitful path to psychological well-being."

As parents, it's our job to let our children know it's okay to express their emotions, even if they are uncomfortable.

## What exactly is sadness?

Sadness is one of the four key human emotions that we experience, with the others being happiness, fear, and anger. Sadness is an emotional pain associated with a natural reaction to a difficult situation. It can encompass feelings of disadvantage, loss, despair, grief, helplessness, disappointment, and sorrow. It may feel as if a temporary shadow is being cast over our lives.

Of course, we must draw a distinction between healthy occasional sadness – like when someone hurts our feelings or when we watch a sad movie – and more serious long-term depression, which is a mood disorder that can be debilitating and may need to be treated with therapy and/or medication. In addition, experts are not recommending that we induce sadness. Instead, it is about accepting the natural sadness that we feel during the ups and downs of daily life.



### Benefits of sadness

Over time, scientists have found many benefits to sadness. According to the video [A Brief History of Melancholy](#), sadness helps us gain wisdom and allows us to more deeply understand profound emotions, like awe and joy. "[Psychology Today](#)" explains that sadness is useful because it alerts us to how we should treat ourselves and how we want to be treated by others.

It is also important to understand and accept that sadness is an inevitable and essential part of life. Many people spend their lives striving to be happy as much as possible instead of accepting and embracing other, less enjoyable emotions.

Unfortunately, as the song mentioned above demonstrates, many cultures do not encourage or embrace sadness. We are told that we should work hard to smile and be as happy as possible. Because of these cultural forces, many people are uneasy watching others be sad and are not sure how to react. Furthermore, sadness is often masked by anger and irritation when it is not accepted.

This message of truly understanding why we need sadness was profoundly communicated in my all-time favorite children's movie "Inside Out". This extraordinary movie creatively explains how our emotions work and the importance of key emotions like joy, sadness, fear, and anger. The most touching moment of the movie is when we learn the lesson that we need sadness in our life to appreciate the positives, and to feel joy.

Here are some of the ways that sadness is beneficial to us:

#### Helps us appreciate the good

We need to feel sadness in order to fully appreciate the positive, joyful moments that we experience. If we are always happy, then that becomes the norm, and our emotions plateau. We might become numb if we only felt happiness. In effect, sadness serves as a contrast to happiness, and makes the happy moments even more special. Feeling sad is certainly not fun, but if we look at it as a moment in time, then we can understand how it plays a critical role in our overall well-being.

Sadness also allows us to take a step back and be grateful for what we have. It provides a way for us to switch our train of thought to appreciate all the good in our lives. It ultimately helps us see what really matters in life – kindness, love, compassion, family, and friends.

In “Inside Out”, Riley finally allows herself to feel all her emotions about what it was like to move to a new city. She was intent on running away, but when she takes the time to connect to her feelings of sadness and fear, she realizes that her life is not as bad as she once thought.

Being sad and scared when she was away from her parents made her realize that her parents loved her and that she was lucky to have a safe home and family to take care of her. We see how the sad rock-bottom moment ended up bringing the family closer together because they were able to communicate and express their emotions.

### **Deepens our connection to others**

Without crying and sadness, Riley and her family would never have bonded. Throughout history, crying and other expressions of sadness have been used as a way for people to express their suffering so that they can ultimately build social bonds with others in their family and community.

Sadness gives us the capacity to open up to others so they can help us. It gives others a chance to offer comfort and care, which is a human need. It also helps us recognize when other people seem sad so we can offer our support in their time of need.

### **Increases motivation**

Finally, sadness serves as a way of motivating us to address challenges. When we are happy and satisfied, we can just keep plugging along without feeling motivated to move forward to achieve new things. Ironically, sadness can trigger us to make changes that will allow us to achieve our goals more effectively.

One study tested this theory by showing participants either happy or sad films and then asking them to do a demanding cognitive task. Researchers found that participants who were happy spent less time, attempted fewer items, and scored fewer correct answers than those in a negative mood, who made more effort and achieved better results. Therefore, a sad mood may increase people’s determination to achieve the potential benefits of making an effort.

This means that it is okay for our kids to be upset sometimes because they did not receive a perfect grade. If they always earned As, then what would motivate them? It’s healthy for kids to feel sad when they do not perform perfectly in order to motivate them to try harder next time.

### **How to help our kids express sadness in a healthy way**

For thousands of years, people have found that the best way to deal with sadness is to express it. When our children feel sad, our job is not necessarily to fix it and make it all better. We should first take a step back to allow our kids to express what’s bothering them and to identify what caused those feelings. When people are sad, they really just want to be heard and understood.

Besides talking through their emotions, we can help our children express their sadness in the following creative ways:

- Read some poetry, and then ask them to write their own poem about how they are feeling.
- Give them a journal or diary, and encourage them to jot down their concerns.
- Play sad songs, which ironically provide some comfort. Maybe they want to write their own song, too.
- Provide all kinds of art supplies, and encourage them to create and show how they feel. Compare their art on days when they feel different emotions.
- Encourage them to use colors to express their mood.
- Put on a puppet show to role-play how they are feeling.



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