



## ***Britain: A nation of emotion?***

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**A research report commissioned by Kleenex®**

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## Introduction

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**What is the emotional state of the nation?** Emotions and how we deal with them is a topic of great interest to Kleenex®. The nature of releasing our emotions – of letting it out – is inextricably linked to tissues, indeed our research finds that they are often the first thing we reach for when letting it out...

Following *The Kleenex® For Men Crying Game Report* (2004) which highlighted the changing attitudes of Britons towards male tears, Kleenex® have again commissioned the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) to investigate the broader emotional terrain of the nation to ask: 'What is the emotional state of the nation?'

Brits have an intriguing relationship with their own and other people's emotions. On the one hand we seem to be masters at over-regulating our emotions. We are not overly demonstrative in the stereotypical manner of the Italians, Spanish or Americans – wearing their passions on their sleeves, sometimes with little regard for the feelings of others. We rather look down on gushing public displays of emotion. In times of crisis we invoke the 'Blitz spirit', uniting in the face of adversity with reserve, stoicism, and the stiff upper lip. Perhaps only the Japanese beat us in the 'hide how you really feel' stakes.

Yet public displays of emotion (think of sporting triumphs such as the Ashes and recent Ryder Cup, Diana's death etc.) attract swathes of media commentary and brow beating over whether these tears of joy, pride or grief, should, at the end of the day, be kept private. The recent Stephen Frears film *The Queen* sees Helen Mirren as the eponymous Queen responding to calls from the Prime Minister to return to London from Balmoral in the wake of the public outpouring of emotion following Diana's death. She stiffly suggests that the British public should deal with their grief privately, with the 'quiet dignity' for which the country is known. Interestingly, the only occasion on which the Queen has cried publically was on the decommissioning of the royal yacht Britannia.

More recently, reality TV has bought us the weekly torrent of tears of joy and sadness on the *X-Factor* and a summer of *Big Brother*, where contestants seemed all too willing to 'let it out' on national television at any opportunity. What's going on?

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**Public displays of emotion in Britain attract media commentary and brow beating over whether we should in fact keep it all bottled up. Yet at the other extreme we have the current weekly torrent of tears of joy and sadness on the *X-Factor*. What's going on?**

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We have become, perhaps, a little confused about the rules. Is being 'emotionally constipated' a sign of social inadequacy? Are we still a nation of Eeyores, the gloomy old donkey in *Winnie the Pooh* – good moaners but poor emoters? Or are we more like up-beat Tiggers – bounding about with our hearts on our sleeves?

Are we still bound by social display rules which mean that reserve and the archetypal 'stiff upper lip' are, in all but special cases (the intimate contexts of close family and friends, the office Christmas party, occasions of national sporting success, a reality TV programme) still the order of the day?

Are we continuing to ignore recent research which suggests that expressing emotions more freely results in improved well-being and that 'emotional intelligence' plays an integral role in our rational decision making? What evidence is there that expressing our emotions actually makes us physically healthier?

Are Britons better able to 'Let it Out' in 2006 than ever before? Is it now okay to 'emote' (to express our emotions) freely, show our vulnerability and embrace the supposedly cathartic effects of letting ourselves and others know how we 'really feel'? Or are we Brits still a little too good at keeping our emotions in check? Might it be better for us, our relationships, our health and the emotional state of the nation, to let it out a little more often? When is it better out than in? When is it okay to 'Let it Out'? What can we do to experience the 'rush of release' more often?

Kleenex® commissioned SIRC to find out. We explored the issues in depth in a series of focus groups and interviews with carefully selected participants. And we also conducted a nationally representative YouGov poll of just over 2,500 British adults. The results of our research reveal a complex picture of the emotional 'health' of the nation.

### SIRC's approach to emotions

At the Social Issues Research Centre we take a particular approach to these issues. We start with the idea that much of human life today is shaped by structures in our brains that have changed little since the days of our early hunter gatherer ancestors back in the Stone Age. These structures are with us from the day we are born. We do not have to learn emotions. How and when we *express* our emotions, on the other hand, is very much a matter of experience and the prevailing 'display rules', or what we might call the rules of 'social reality'. Different societies have different rules. To generalise, while it may be acceptable to be emotionally expressive 24/7 in Los Angeles, this is not necessarily the case in Tokyo or London.

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**How we *express* our emotions is very much a matter of experience and the prevailing rules of 'social reality' which differ from culture to culture.**

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Expressing and managing our emotions according to 'social reality' rules have an important role to play in social bonding, maintaining good relationships and decision making, making ourselves and others feel good (or bad) and enabling us to adapt to our environments. Social psychologists and anthropologists stress the role of culturally specific and learned 'display rules' that dictate how, when and with whom we express our emotions. These argue that we all work to maintain 'emotional face' according to particular social rules.

Social scientists also often look for exceptions – occasions where the rules are broken – as a way of revealing the day to day conventions that we take for granted. Consider the annual Oscars ceremony and the convention that means the losers are expected to conceal their disappointment and jealousy by smiling for the cameras. At the same time the oh-so surprised winner is allowed to tearfully gush through the acceptance speech. It is obviously the losers who most want, and some would say need, to 'let it out'. But display rules, or more simply put, 'good grace', means that in this situation they are tied by convention to keeping their emotions in check.

More prosaically, our day to day lives demand that we create and maintain an emotional face and that in different situations and with different people we express ourselves and our emotions differently. Maintaining face and managing our emotions allows us to feel good, losing face results in upset.

SIRC's approach embraces both the evolutionary view – that emotions are innate responses to events in our environment – and the view of social science which places emphasis on the social rules of emotional expression which are learned through experience and the social realities of the cultures in which we live. How we deal with our emotions, when we let them out and when we keep them bottled up is, as we will see, a highly complex business.

## The Findings

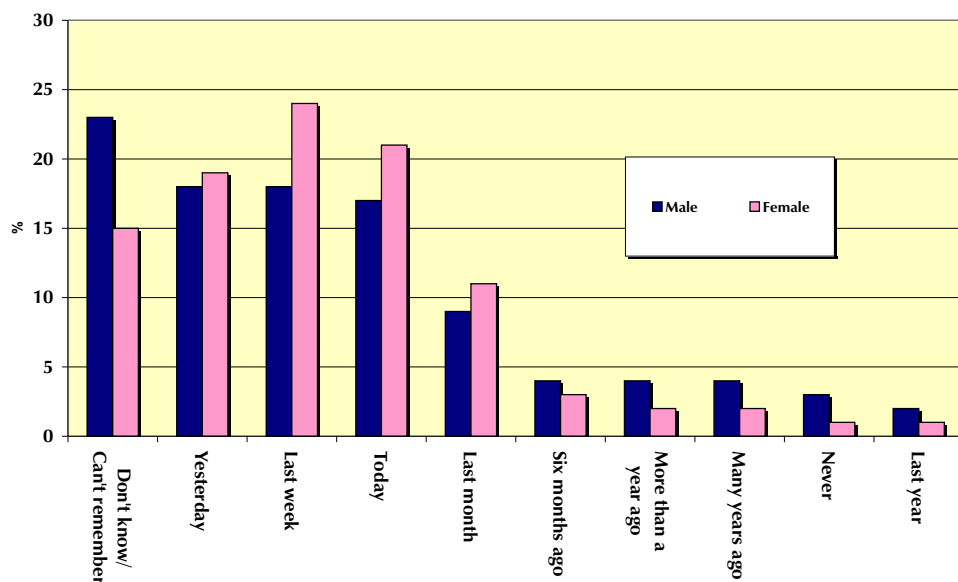
We might know that it is better out than in, but that doesn't mean we do it

A very substantial 72% of our national survey respondents thought that bottling it up is 'bad for your health' yet less than 20% had 'let it out' in the past 24 hours, as shown in Figure 1. A further 19% were unable to remember the last time they 'let it out'. Given the media-hype around public displays of emotion – look at this summer's Big Brother 'emotions fest', the tears of David Beckham, Tiger Woods, and so on – we might assume that we are all letting it out on a regular basis, and are all the better for it.

Our research has revealed that there is something of a gap between what people say they think they should do, what they say they do, and what they actually do. In our national survey 72% of respondents thought that bottling it up is 'bad for your health', yet less than 20% had 'let it out' in the past 24 hours, with 19% not being able to remember at all the last time they 'let it out'.

While relief, happiness, relaxation and stress release are seen as just some of the positive spin offs from a good old cry/laugh/argument, we still don't seem able to 'emote' – to express our emotions freely – as much as we think we should. If we know that, in theory, it is better out than in, what is it that is holding us back? Our attitudes and opinions toward expressing emotions might have changed but our behaviour, it would seem, has yet to catch up.

Figure 1. When was the last time you 'let it out'?



Among our focus group participants and interviewees there was a tendency to associate 'emotion' immediately with negatives: tears, anger, rage and the like. What also emerged was a sense that we sometimes have difficulty even in identifying what our emotions really are. As one female focus group participant observed of herself:

*"...I'd handed in the dissertation, done the exams, everything was finished, and I woke up in bed one morning and I said "Oh god, I feel really strange" and my husband said "What do you mean", and I said " I feel really odd, I don't know what's wrong with me, I can't describe how I feel...I, oh shit I know what it is, I'm happy!"*

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### Happiness is the elusive emotional holy grail of our time.

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An interesting feature of our focus groups was the observation by both men and women that not only is happiness sometimes hard to identify (as the female focus group participant above shows) but also that we are a little envious about other people's happiness.

*"Recently...I went through a stage of being so happy, it was the start of the heat wave and I thrive on the heat...the sun came out and I was jumping around and really happy, and I actually thought that that was over-the-top happy because people were really looking at me a bit weird you know! ... I was saying how happy I was and that everything was great and I don't know, people seemed to get fed up of it!"*

*"People can be funny about people being really happy, its because they're jealous because they haven't got that and they're feeling down..."*

*"...as kids it was the whole don't show off thing..."*

The rules of 'social reality' in Britain mean that our emotional default is not one of happiness. If someone is too full of the joys of spring they attract cynicism, sarcasm and often badly concealed jealousy. Real life is 'grim'; better to be a bit miserable like everyone else than to rock the emotional boat.

On the other hand, the participants themselves observed the focus group sessions to be a 'safe' place to talk about their emotions – one or two chose to share personal experiences which would have been unlikely in other circumstances. Given a 'safe outlet' people are more likely to express their emotions. Reality TV shows, the excuse of a sporting triumph, the Christmas and New Year period when colleagues, friends, and family come together lubricated by alcohol. SIRC Co-director Kate Fox highlights the special rules (or lack of them) which come into play at office-parties in her best-selling book, *Watching the English*.<sup>1</sup> Surveys carried out by SIRC revealed that 60% of under-thirties, and 40% of thirty to forty somethings, admit to having 'made fools of themselves' at the office Christmas party. Kate notes that:

*"Although this festive 'blabbing' can sometimes cause embarrassment, it can also have positive effects: 37 % had made friends with a former enemy or rival, or 'made up' after a*

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1 Fox, K. 2004. *Watching the English: the hidden rules of English behaviour*. London: Hodder and Staunton.

*quarrel...and 13% had plucked up the courage to tell someone they fancied them."*

People need these socially sanctioned 'safe outlets' in order to let out their emotions often just beneath the surface. Certainly by the end of our research for Kleenex® we had started to call our emotions focus groups 'therapy sessions!' The lesson? Give people a 'safe' outlet and they will use it.

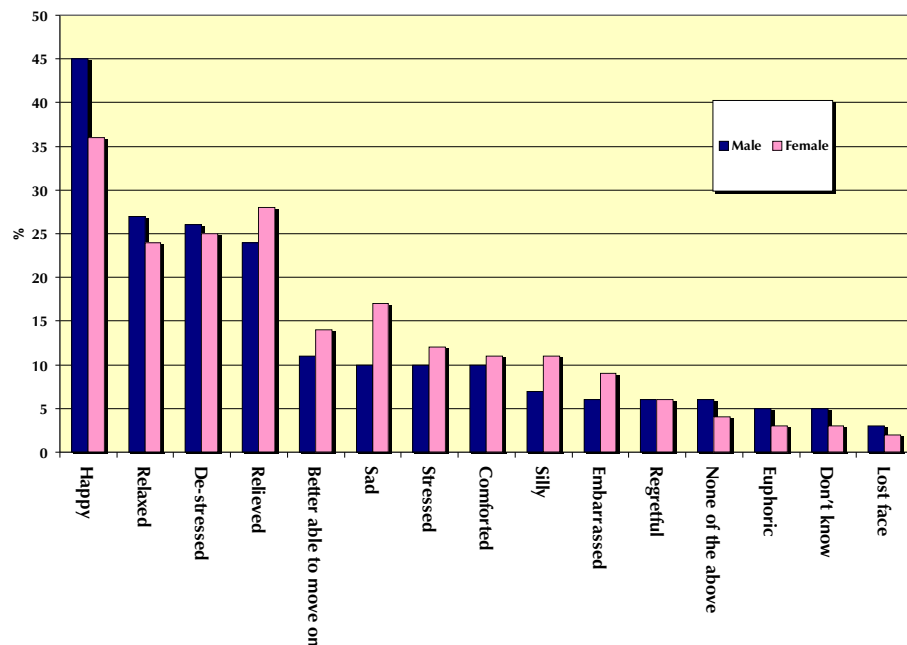
**People feel better when they can and do, let it out.**

**'Positive affect' and the 'afterglow'**

Telling someone that you love them, paying someone a compliment, talking through your feelings – all these things were identified in our focus groups and survey responses as leading to what social psychologists call 'positive affect'. 'Affect' in this case is a terms used by psychologists to refer to the emotion expressed in facial expression, body language and behaviour. *Positive* affect fostered through compliments, praise, sharing ones emotions with someone and even moaning, makes ourselves and other people feel good and helps us to bond.

The outcomes of letting it out also have positive individual after-effects. These were recurring themes from both our national poll and our focus groups and interviews. Happiness, relaxation, reduced stress and relief were all highlighted. Interestingly, men were more likely to feel happiness (45% men to 36% of women), while women tend to feel 'silly' after having expressed emotions freely (7% of men to 11% of women) as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. How do you feel after having "let it out"



It should also be noted that although 'letting it out' was generally agreed to make us feel better, there are often negative after effects as well, including sadness, silliness, embarrassment and stress.



Our focus group respondents also reported high levels of personal altruism in the handing out of compliment stakes. As one participant reflected:

*"You know, even within our band, it is easy to just let things go by... but for example if (friend) has sung really well and I tell him that then that's going to potentially make him more confident, and a better singer, and that's going to help our cause you know..."*

While 31% of our survey respondents were of the opinion that Brits are good at expressing negative feelings about someone or something, just 5% said that we are good at expressing positive feelings. This corresponds to the 'Eeyore' characterisation of Brits as good moaners but poor emoters. Moaning is not about 'real emotions' and it allows a great deal of masking of our feelings under the guise of letting it out. As one focus group participant noted:

*"...one of the reasons that people like to moan to each other because you all feel like you are in the same boat and you're like 'oh yeah, we're all pissed off.'"*

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**Brits are much better at expressing negative emotions than positive ones.**

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This very British notion of the 'Blitz Spirit' – bonding in the face of adversity or through a good moan – is something that was very evident in our focus groups. We find moaning pleasurable, as we will see later.

The mismatch between our 'intimate' focus groups, where people were keen to present themselves as caring and sharing, and the national poll responses, which as always were anonymous and allow for more 'honesty', indicated a fundamental truth. There is always a big difference between what people say they should do, what they say they do and what they actually do.

Interestingly, one focus group participant from New Zealand was very keen to present himself as more emotionally in-touch than the Brits in the room, and all the better for it. "I'm emotional 24/7" he said and went on to talk about the benefits of letting people know how you feel.

*"...for me it is a very positive thing and when that's gone the very emotional side of it has gone then there is an afterglow thing which is actually quite neat and you go: 'Hey, I'm actually okay!'..."*

The same participant noted:

*"...there are occasions where I've thought to myself 'I really want to get that buzz again!' and it's a natural buzz ... you're either letting something go quite often, or you are acknowledging something, and when you do that...quite often when it happens I don't want it to stop...because its actually quite a nice feeling...Sometimes I say to people: 'Why don't you visit the land of tears?!' - not the sad tears, but turn it around a little, you know?"*

Relief, euphoria, even the 'buzz' mentioned above were all seen as positive personal effects of really having 'let it out'. Our survey reported similar findings, with 40% of respondents suggesting that having a good emoter made them 'happy', 26% that it can have de-stressing effects and another 26% that it is often just one big relief, pure and simple.

### What does letting it out do for our relationships?

As we've seen, social psychologists like to talk about 'positive affect' or 'prosocial relations', which refer to the positive benefits of expressing emotions in appropriate ways. Work on the role played by expressing so-called secondary or complex emotions such as disillusionment, regret, nostalgia, etc. in social bonding suggests that in our quest to belong to in-groups, such as family, friends and colleagues, we need to be able to express and manage these secondary emotions competently. Failure to do so means being relegated to something of an outcast, 'not really getting it', and thus not belonging.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is a basic tenet of psychology that we like people who are like us.

In broader terms, our research indicated that we are aware that we get what we give in terms of expressing our emotions and supporting others in the expression of theirs. As one male focus group participant suggested:

*"I think that if everyone made an effort to say when they thought someone was doing something good or positive then the whole world would be a more positive place really..."*

The place of collectively expressed and experienced emotion is also something which participants in our focus groups identified. The infamous 'Tanganyikan laughter epidemic' has become the stuff of urban myth,<sup>3</sup> but the notion of contagious laughter is something that we have all experienced. A fit of the giggles, someone's infectious laughter, the collective euphoria experienced at a festival or concert or national sporting triumph, etc.

In our focus groups there was agreement that such collectively experienced and expressed positive emotion was something to be enjoyed and encouraged. As one female participant noted: "...good things, like at a concert or a festival...and you're sharing a positive experience..." A male participant, said: "...usually its with other people as well, you're sort of bouncing off someone else... relating to someone else..." Dancing, singing, football chants all came up as good ways to 'let it out' in a group. But...

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### We are inherently wary of American style 'gushing'.

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Interestingly, an awareness of the culturally specific flip side of too much 'positive affect' was also noted. In very British terms, and reflective of the fact that we are

2 See for example: Vaes, J. et al. 2002. The lost email: prosocial reactions induced by uniquely human emotions. *The British Psychological Society*. 41: 521-534.

3 Cited as an example of Mass Psychogenic Illness, the Tanganyikan Laughter Epidemic of 1962 reportedly saw an isolated fit of the giggles amongst a group of school girls rise to epidemic proportions, affecting neighbouring schools and communities and lasting for six months.

inherently wary of gushing American style emoting, one focus group participant observed:

*"...You know, 'Oh I really love that person, aren't they great, aren't they lovely'...and you think well, he says that about everybody, so it has no meaning. It doesn't mean anything...it's not an emotion anymore, its just a statement - he doesn't mean it. The less you use those positive emotions if you like, then the more meaningful they are, because then you know that when they do come, they are genuine."*

The fact that we are concerned about positive expressions of emotions to others not being reciprocated also came through in the focus groups. We are wary about the possible social fall-out that might result from laying ourselves bare emotionally:

*"There's a custom involved as well I think. If you praise someone, or you're very happy, you make them feel very positive and there's a fear that that won't be reciprocated I think, so there's a certain amount of guarding going on, if you're not sure..."*

On the plus side, it would seem that we Brits tend to put the feelings of others before our own. Often, subjecting someone to our emotions is seen as rude, as a violation of the social rules which demand that we do not make either others or ourselves embarrassed or uncomfortable. Reining in our emotions is seen as a sign of maturity. Just think about the saying 'crying like a baby'.

**Eeyores versus emotive Tiggers** Brits, it seems, are still a nation of Eeyores rather than emotive Tiggers – 31% of our respondents suggested that we are good at expressing negative emotions about someone or something, while only 5% agreed that we are good at expressing positive emotions.

As SIRC Co-Director Kate Fox observes in detail in *Watching the English*, we are good at moaning about safe things – the weather, the traffic, perhaps a particularly annoying colleague – but we are fundamentally still wary about expressing how we really feel.

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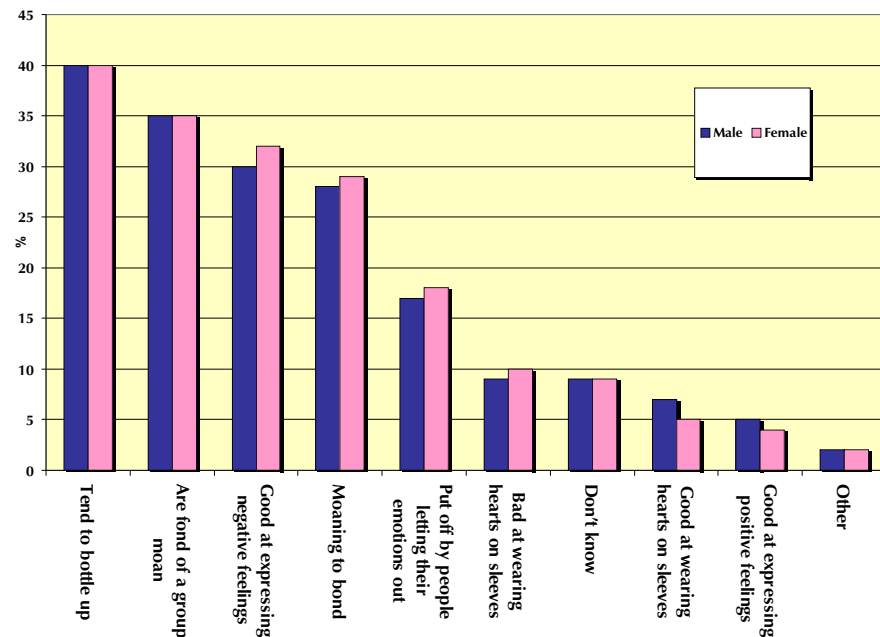
### A good moan helps us Brits strengthen our relationships.

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A good moan is something we enjoy and something that we are aware helps to strengthen our relationships in the prosocial ways mentioned above. We asked our survey respondents what they thought best characterised British people and, perhaps surprisingly, 35% were honest enough to agree that they were fond of a good group moan. A further 28% said that moaning was a way of bonding with others, as shown in Figure 3. The largest percentage of those polled still

characterised Brits as unwilling to express 'real feelings', preferring instead to bottle them up (40%).

Figure 3. Which of the following do you think best describes Britons?



**Brits are highly skilled 'mock-moaners' – a nation of cynics, good at being critical so long as it isn't about anything really serious like 'real' emotions.**

One of our focus participants astutely observed:

*"...the key thing about the communal moan (is) that you're not being negative against another person, or about them, its sort of a communal 'oh, everything's bad, we're all miserable' ...and that ultimately makes us happy - that everyone feels as bad as we do."*

This kind of comfortable 'venting' is a safe option for expressing a certain degree of negative opinion. As another focus group participant said: "It's that shared moan, 'oh the weather's crap, or I'm so tired'...". Our research would suggest that the 'positive affect' created by a good moan is something quite different from the liberating catharsis that can come from really letting it out. We Brits are highly skilled 'mock-moaners' – cynics who are good at being critical, so long as it isn't about anything really serious like 'real emotions'.

*"It's easier to be critical, yes definitely, it's easier to slag something off". "*

*"We don't want people to go and get above their station, it's a class thing as well its like a disease, we are, we're a nation of cynics."*

*"I find, I have loads and loads of joyous feelings, but there's always sort of a duct that kicks in your head going "boo, what about your mortgage, what about this, what about that" ... so it is, it's short lived joy."*

When faced with 'real emotion', particularly if it is not in a context deemed 'appropriate', we tend to back off. One of our male focus group participants described his reaction to someone else's emotional state and perhaps typifies this typically British reaction to high emotions expressed at inopportune moments:

*"... I was with someone yesterday who I suddenly realised was massively emotional, they hadn't... (shown it) but it suddenly came through in their voice ... so what I rather Englishly did was just back off and hide as quickly as possible because I didn't want to see the full expression of whatever it was that they were about (to express)."*

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**We bond through safe moaning, but we are fundamentally embarrassed by our own and other peoples' emotions.**

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Overall, 32% of respondents said that they would approach a crying stranger in the street and offer them help, as shown in Figure 4 below, with the over 50s (37%) and Scots (42%) most likely to do so. A further 23% said that public displays of emotion made them uncomfortable, with Londoners being slightly more uncomfortable with this than respondents in other parts of the country.

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**72% of respondents agreed with the statement 'bottling up emotions is bad for your health'.**

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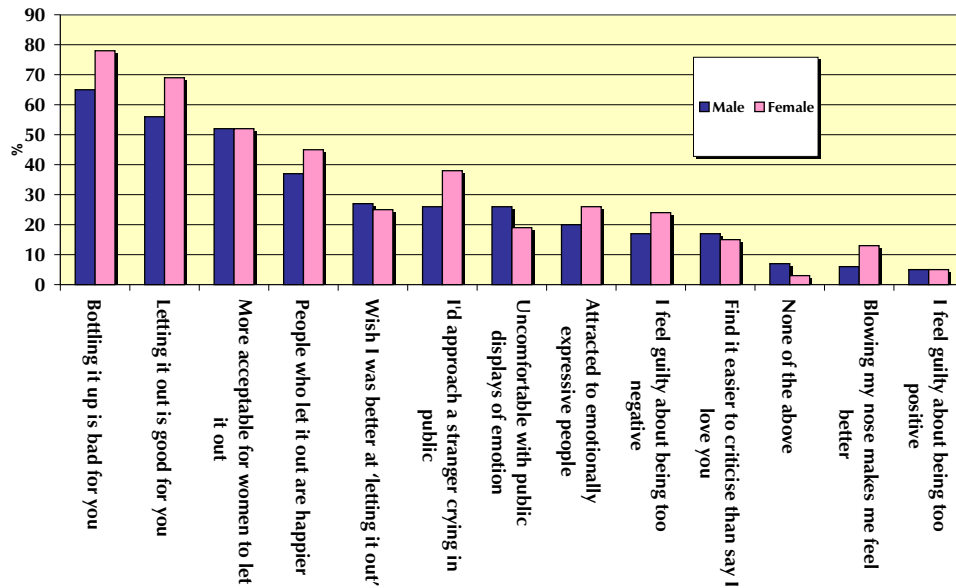
Respondents tended to deny the persistence of a stereotypical British 'stiff upper lip'. The general trend reported from our research is that we are not as bad as we used to be. One interviewee in his early twenties suggested: "I wouldn't call it the stiff upper lip..more like 'the hanging out lower lip' and grunting ..." (does a sulking face).

An interesting cross-cultural flip-side was provided by one of our participants:

*"...my parents are West Indian, and West Indian children are brought up to be seen rather than heard...their parents weren't particularly emotional and I don't think they are either... but I am, my generation is. I don't know if that's me being British or what..."*

Although we don't 'learn' emotions, the rules of 'social reality' which govern how we express them are different in different cultures and *are* something we learn.

Figure 4. Attitudes toward expressing emotions



Several of our focus group participants and interviewees reflected on their own experiences of trying to reconcile different sets of cultural rules:

A male focus group participant noted:

*"...I think it's an upbringing thing and perhaps yeah the cultural thing as well, I mean my father is not English, he was from Yugoslavia... as I grew up I was used to people having very direct emotions and very direct opinions and nothing was withheld... I've grown up (to) understand that not everything in this country you can say ... some common sense hits in and good manners and courtesy mean you do hold back."*

A female participant with similarly mixed parentage:

*"Also I think it's about the way that we relate to other people – I think we find it easier, especially in this country, and I'm half Hungarian, in Hungary things are completely different..."*

And an interviewee from Southern Europe:

*"...I think there are differences in the ways in which people express emotions..... I'm not British, I'm Southern European...I think that we are more happy to experience and express things..."*

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We all have emotions that we choose to keep to ourselves.  
 However much we like to think that we are true to ourselves in every situation, we are not.

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In the Japanese language there are two intriguing words used to describe people's social roles. *Tatema* and *honne* refer respectively to one's 'façade' – the face one presents in public, expressing opinions, behaviour and emotions that are socially acceptable – and one's inner or 'true' feelings – desires and emotions which rarely, if ever, are expressed. The very existence of these terms provides an interesting point of comparison for our research. What we might consider 'two-faced' or 'inscrutable' levels of emotional expressiveness and behaviour among Japanese people are, arguably, perhaps more 'honestly dishonest' than our own. We all have emotions, feeling and attitudes which we choose to keep to ourselves. However much we (and particularly perhaps Americans) might like to think that we are true to ourselves in every situation, we are not. We are constantly role playing, including the way in which we express our emotions.

**How do we let it out?** The results from our national survey indicate that laughter is, indeed, one of the best medicines, with 66% of respondents reporting it as their most likely way of 'letting it out'. Our focus groups were also characterised by a lot of laughter and self-deprecating wit of the type that 'yes, we know we are emotionally constipated, but that doesn't mean we can't laugh about it'. British humour is a great subterfuge for the expression of 'real emotion'.

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**British humour provides us with a great subterfuge emotionally.**

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Laughter was closely followed by 'talking about it', with 59% of respondents saying they chose to talk through the emotional issue. Crying and having an argument were also reported as common ways of expressing our emotions.

As Figure 5 below shows, how we let it out is unsurprisingly rather dependent on one's gender. A breakdown of responses by gender indicates that women are well over twice as likely as men to 'let it out' by crying (28% of men to 71% of women), as well as being generally more emotionally expressive.

It is widely agreed that gender differences in the expression of emotion are universal, with evolutionary psychologists arguing that men have evolved to cry less than women as tearful (i.e: weak) males would be at a physical and reproductive disadvantage.

Social psychologists and anthropologists would argue that gender differences in the expression of emotion are products of our socialisation. Certainly, despite the rise of the so-called new man and the 'new rules'<sup>4</sup> identified in SIRC's earlier research, which mean that it is now socially acceptable if not favourable for men to cry, it remains women who are both 'allowed' to express and do in fact express

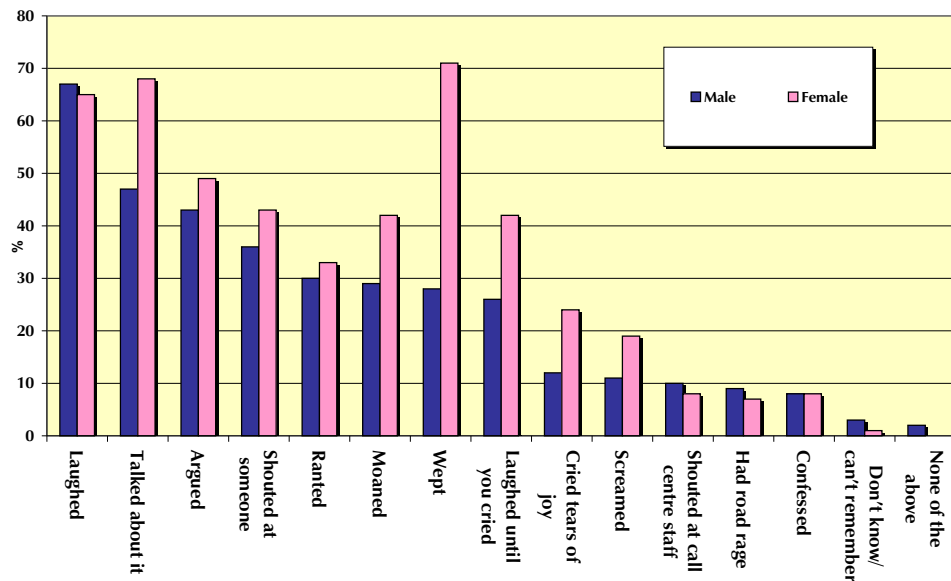
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4 See: *The Kleenex for Men Crying Game Report: A study of men and crying*. 2004. SIRC.



their emotions more. But do men feel emotions any less, or are they just restricted by the rules of 'social reality' more?

Figure 5. In the last six months how have you 'let it out'? – by gender.



**Differences between men and women**

There is a significant amount of scientific evidence that suggests that women are more emotionally expressive than men. The results of our research would certainly support this, with women in our focus groups mentioning hugs, kisses, and occasions where their own emotions had taken them by surprise. Interestingly, the women in our focus group were also quite reticent at labelling emotions, confirming the notion that all too often words fail to provide an adequate form of expression. They also seemed more inclined to use the opportunity to talk about emotions as an opportunity to talk about *themselves*.

**Women tend to use the opportunity to talk about emotions, as an opportunity to talk about *themselves*. And from a woman's perspective there is a fine balance for men to strike between showing their vulnerability and reining it in.**

Women's attitudes towards men's expression of emotion were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, a man 'in touch with his emotions' was viewed very positively. From women's perspectives there is a fine balance for men to strike between showing their vulnerability – and here is the rub – in 'appropriate' contexts and reining their emotions in at other times:

*"...when I see a man cry it does really affect me, I can see women cry all the time and it happens all the time and you're just like 'cheer up mate', but when a man cries I'm completely thrown by it..."*

*"Men seem to cry for a really direct personal thing, not so much an empathic reason..."*



*"...it's like if you went to the cinema with somebody and they sat crying through every film and damping the popcorn then you'd get fed up wouldn't you?"*

*"I don't know what it is about it but you wouldn't really fancy someone who just keeps on blubbing all the time would you?"*

Expressing just the 'right' amount of emotional guardedness, openness and intimacy plays a crucial role in our perceptions of potential mates.

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**Expressing our emotions plays an important role in the alchemy of attraction.**

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Some of the men in our focus groups appeared to feel both rather baffled and rather excluded from being able to 'let it out'. Over half of men and women polled (52%) also thought that it is more socially acceptable for women to 'let it out' than men. There was a sense among our male focus group participants and interviewees that they want to feel free to express their emotions more, but often hold back for fear of treading on what is perceived of as a women's 'territory':

*"... in terms of the emotional ground, the territory is often taken up by a woman in this situation, so as a guy you're holding back...unless you want a huge fight - you can't match that - up to that emotional level so you're holding back, holding back..."*

*"Women generally see a man able to emote as a strength, but not too much! They also seem to become emotional themselves if they see a man they are close to emotional."*

A female focus group participant observed:

*"I think we feel the need to justify our emotions less, I mean this is a massive gender stereotype but I think men tend to feel like they need a really like good justification to have some kind of emotional out burst in a way that women perhaps don't..."*

Whether women actually experience more emotion, and the physiological changes associated with emotion, than men is a different matter. Empirical research has tended to show that while women are more emotionally expressive than men, such differences cannot be attributed to differences in individual emotional experiences.<sup>5</sup> Socialised differences, by way of family 'expressiveness' and level of 'androgyny' (behaviour and appearance which is neither stereotypically masculine nor feminine), tend to be moderators of emotional expressiveness. Such evidence, and the results of our own research point to individual's particular patterns of emotional expression, as just that; highly individualised.

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5 For example see: Kring, A.M. & Gordon, A.H. 1998. Sex Differences in emotion: expression, experience and physiology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 74 (3): 686 - 703.

**'Letting it out' as a means of expressing one's individuality** The very fact of being human in the mid noughties means that we now like to think of ourselves as unique individuals. Our individual identity, or 'personality' is seen as closely bound, among other things, to the particular ways in which we deal with our emotions. As one focus group participant suggested:

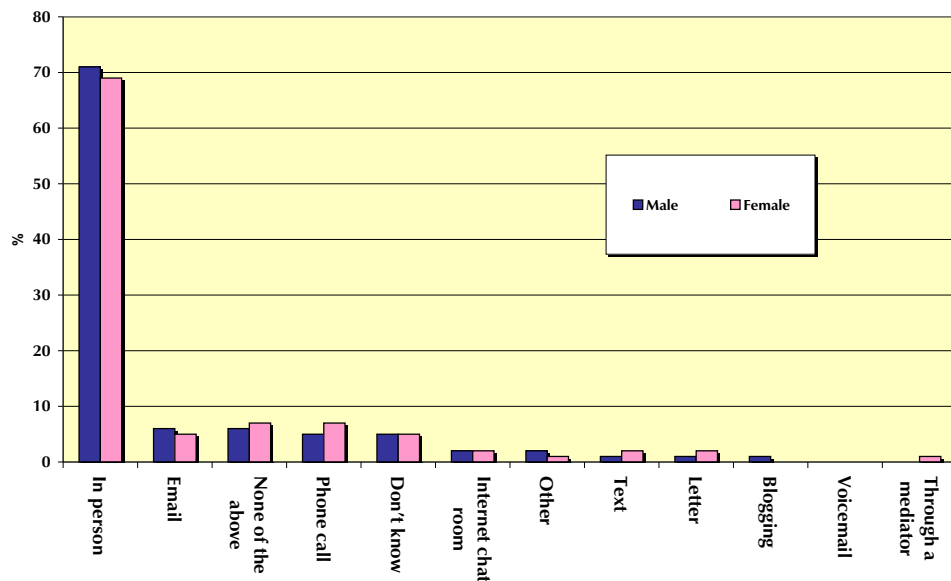
*"I think your emotions are like a finger print of your personality. How you deal with different challenges and how you respond to them makes up a part of your persona."*

*"I think that if you are able to express your emotions, whether they are positive or negative, anger or sensitivity defines you. I think you are more comfortable in yourself if you can express your emotions. If you are holding it in, I think that it can create insecurities... definitely."*

We consider our emotions, feelings and our levels of inhibition, in part at least, to define us. So how do we express our emotions, and who do we express them with?

**How and with whom do we 'let it out'** Our results intriguingly show that for a nation of otherwise apparent ostriches with our heads stuck in the emotional sands, we still claim to favour 'letting it out' face to face, rather than hiding behind an email, phone call or letter. 70% of respondents described letting it out in person as the means by which they would be most comfortable expressing themselves emotionally, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. By what means would you be most comfortable 'letting it out'?



Some commentators would claim that the rise of an 'always on' society is seeing an irreparable decline in face-to-face communication. A big question for sociologists of our 'Web 2.0' age is whether new communication interfaces such as email, online social networking, and wireless connectivity are, or indeed can, replace the vital role of face to face communication where emotions are concerned. Indeed, our digitised society aside, the recent debate surrounding Jack Straw MP's comments on Muslim women's wearing of the face veil says a lot

about the importance our society places on being able to read people's faces in order to know their 'true' feelings.

Our favouring of face-to-face 'letting it out' was mirrored in our focus groups, where both male and female participants reported that this kind of expression was the most favoured means of letting someone know how you feel, and knowing how that makes them feel.

A degree of conformity to social norms may influence some of these responses. We know that it is more polite or brave to 'let it out' in person but as one male interviewee in his early twenties let slip (and something which is perhaps truer than we would readily admit):

*"I prefer letting it out in person (long pause)... but it depends what it is, sometimes I might do it over the phone or text..."*

Certainly, when our emotions take us by surprise, a face to face encounter is unavoidable. A pre-mediated 'letting someone know how we feel' tends to mean that we want an instant reaction with both confirmation that the message has been received and the rush of having got it all off one's chest. As one male participant noted:

*"I had thought over what I was going to say before, so it wasn't rage or anything...but the person I was speaking to looked quite shocked. I felt good afterwards, glad that I'd got it off my chest. I'd been wanting to do it for a while.... Yeah, a friend had said to ring them first but I am glad that I didn't because I wanted to do it in person and see their face and their reaction... I think when you're talking to someone on the phone, they can always say something different, and I wanted to see his eyes..."*

And a female interviewee said:

*"I'd never write or email or text, it is too impersonal, you can't get the depth of feeling."*

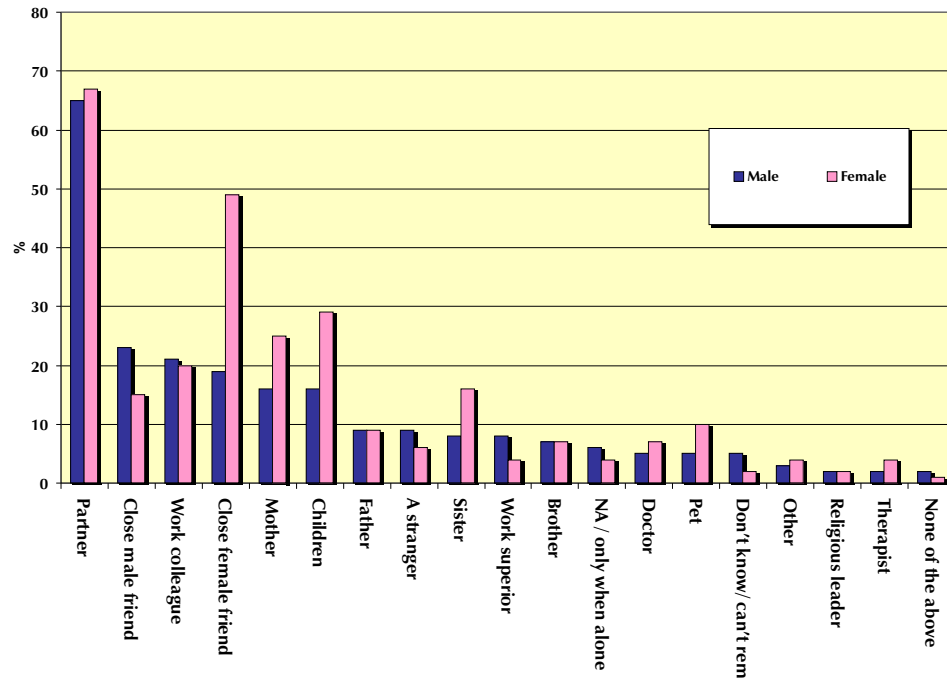
In our poll 66% of our respondents favoured their partner as the number one person to 'let it out' to, as shown in Figure 7 below.

Women on the whole favoured female friends and, depending on their age, sisters, mothers and children to 'let it out' to. 29% of women reported letting it out to their children compared to only 16% of men. Survey results indicated that men and women on the whole preferred to let it out in front of a same sex friend. Letting it out to your mother was favoured over your father by both genders. 9% of women and men would let it out to their fathers while 16% of men and 25% of women would choose their mothers.

Women are also more likely than men to express their emotions to their pets (10% of women, to 5% of men) and their therapist. Men on the other hand, although most likely to let it out to a partner, are more likely to let it out to a colleague, a stranger or when they are alone. Perhaps surprisingly, our survey results indicate that men are twice as likely as women to let it out in front of a work superior (8%

of men to 4% of women). This may be explained by women's wariness of being labelled 'emotional' or 'hysterical' in a work context.

Figure 7. Who have you 'let it out' to?



More broadly, research by some social psychologists has also indicated that positive expression of emotion is most likely to be facilitated in the company of those we know and that negative expressions of emotion are inhibited by the company of strangers.<sup>6</sup> Our focus group participants reflected on the fact that we feel free to express different emotions with different people:

*"But it does depend who you are expressing to as well. I have no problem at all about telling my children how I feel about them – how much I love them, how proud I am of them and of what they do..."*

*"...we modify the way we interact with people who are strangers compared to people that are family or friends, so it depends, we are always changing emotions, no not emotions, but changing the way we express emotions depending on that person we're interacting with".*

*"I think that the situation you are in can alter your emotions though...in a different situation, with the same person, you might express it differently... The life I have now, I'm very emotional, but with a different lifestyle I'd be calmer..."*

6 See: Buck, R. et al. 1992. Social facilitation and inhibition of emotional expression and communication. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 30: 587-596.

What anthropologists call 'display rules' and what we are calling the rules of 'social reality' again come into play here. Each society has unspoken rules of conduct which mean that certain contexts with certain people are reserved for the expression of certain emotions. We are certainly aware that we need specific outlets in order to 'let it out'. Office Christmas parties, taking 'time out', a cathartic cry at a sad movie all came up as examples of 'safe' ways to 'let it out':

*"... (At the Christmas party) all these women in accounts who would get drunk, tell everyone how much they love them, and then cry".*

*"...it's also very good for me cause I will just cry and will just take myself out of society, it might be for ten minutes, it could be for ten hours, but I actually enjoy doing it..."*

*"I feel very lucky to be able to let it out by writing songs...it's the perfect outlet for me to be another person - and all of the emotions that I put into my songs is let out, so I feel really lucky to have that".*

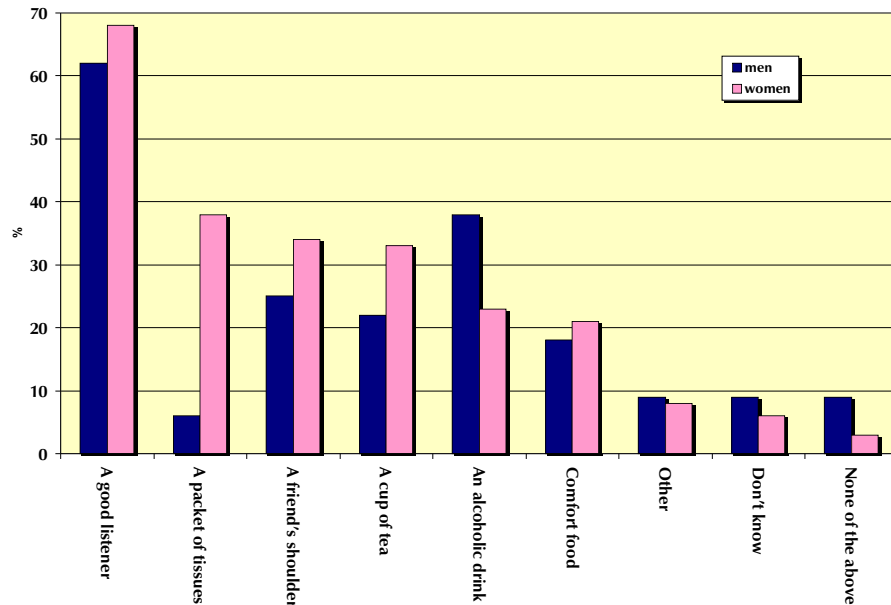
*"...if I watch a really sloppy movie...it's not just crying I mean you get this feeling in your chest..."*

*"...it's like you've got an excuse to do it rather than in real life where you'd feel a little bit more closed off."*

**What do we most like to have close at hand when we 'let it out'?**

In our poll 66% of respondents suggested a 'good listener' as their most favoured crutch to have close by when 'letting it out', as shown in Figure 8. This was followed by 28% favouring a cup of tea and 24% a packet of tissues. Those favouring tissues were 38% of women compared with just 6% of men, providing a little weight to the notion that women are more tearful than men.

Figure 8. What do you like to have with you when letting it out?



Our survey results indicated that men prefer to drown their sorrows, or indeed joy, with 38% favouring an alcoholic drink.

**38% of women would want a packet of tissues with them when they let it out, whereas 38% of men would look to alcohol instead.**

**Age differences**

As well as some clear differences between the genders, there were also some variations according to age. Several of the younger women in their twenties in our focus groups, for example, said that they were more comfortable expressing their emotions to close friends rather than family:

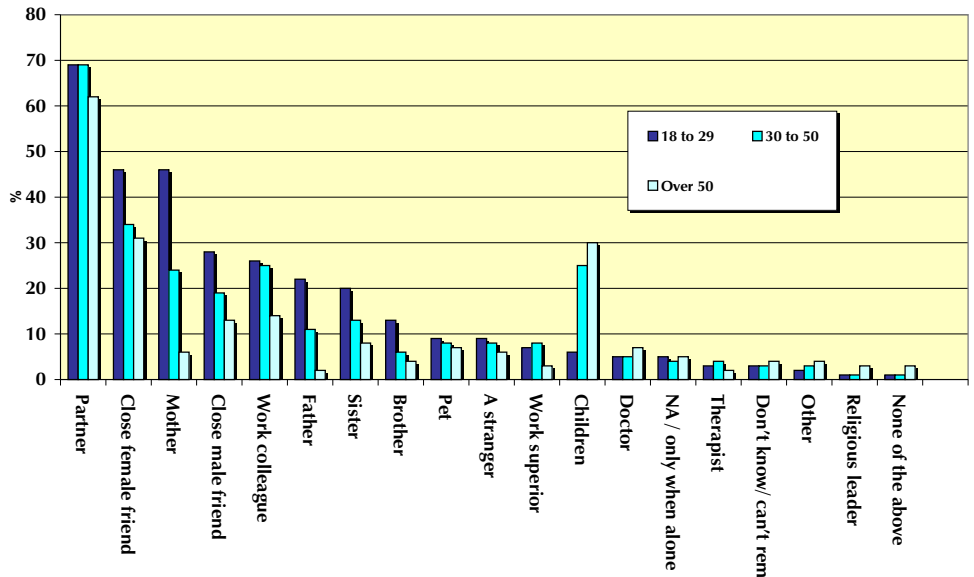
*"I actually find it a lot easier to tell friends things than I do my family. I'm not actually that relaxed with my family."*

Those with children and families of their own were more likely to express their emotions in this context:

*"I have no problem at all about telling my children how I feel about them – how much I love them, how proud I am of them and of what they do. I'm very seldom expressing negative emotions to them actually, hardly ever..."*

Such age differences were also reflected in our poll, as shown in Figure 9.

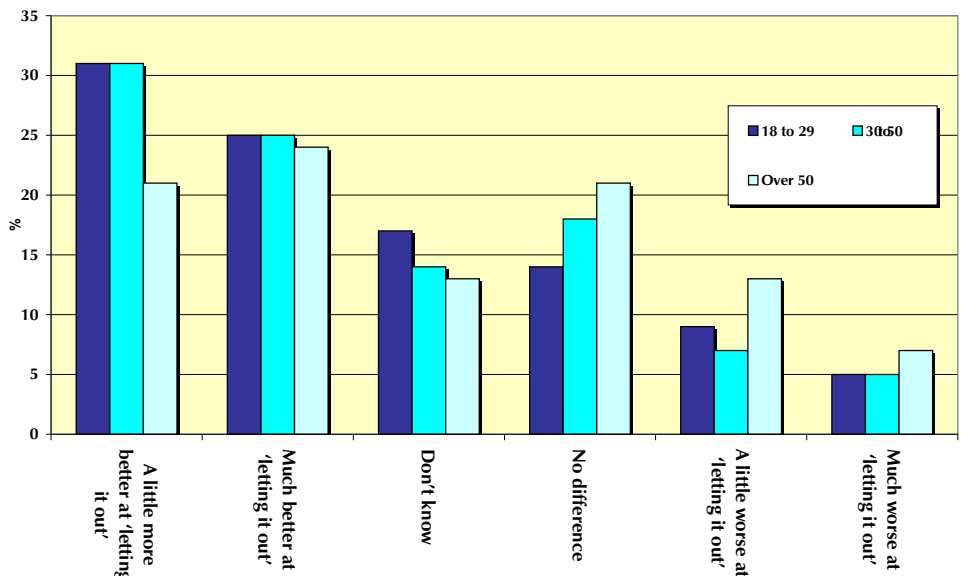
Figure 9. Who are you most likely to 'let it out' to? – by age



Similarly, 50% of poll respondents considered that age brings an increasing ability to be able to express ones emotions, as shown in Figure 10.

Interestingly, people over 50 tended toward the opinion that it becomes much easier to express ones emotion with age, while the 18-29 age group were most likely to consider that age makes it harder to express ones emotions.

Figure 10. Do you think that your generation is better or worse at letting it out than previous generations? – by age



This discrepancy is perhaps indicative of the younger generation's (mis)perception of the continued socialisation that goes along with the aging process. Two male focus group participants in their late 50s suggested:

*"...its only when you get to a certain age, and you've matured and you feel that you can just say it how it is..."*

*"I think it comes from having a few hard knocks, may be not huge ones in other peoples eyes, I mean I've never been to war, I've never been shot at, I've never been attacked ... but I've had emotional attacks - I think we all have, and its how we address them, and how we actually put them into little boxes and go "well, I don't actually need to address that one, because its not that important - but hang on, what about these ones?" ... "*

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**Young people are more likely to use road rage, screaming and arguing to let it out, while surprisingly the 'grumpy old man and woman' generation turns out to be pretty mellow.**

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Reflecting on the age differences within the focus groups and the results of the national survey we observed a general trend that older participants appeared more, or at least equally as comfortable as younger people, with 'letting it out', and perhaps surprisingly, given the 'grumpy old man'/'grumpy old woman' stereotype, substantially more mellow, as shown in Figure 10.

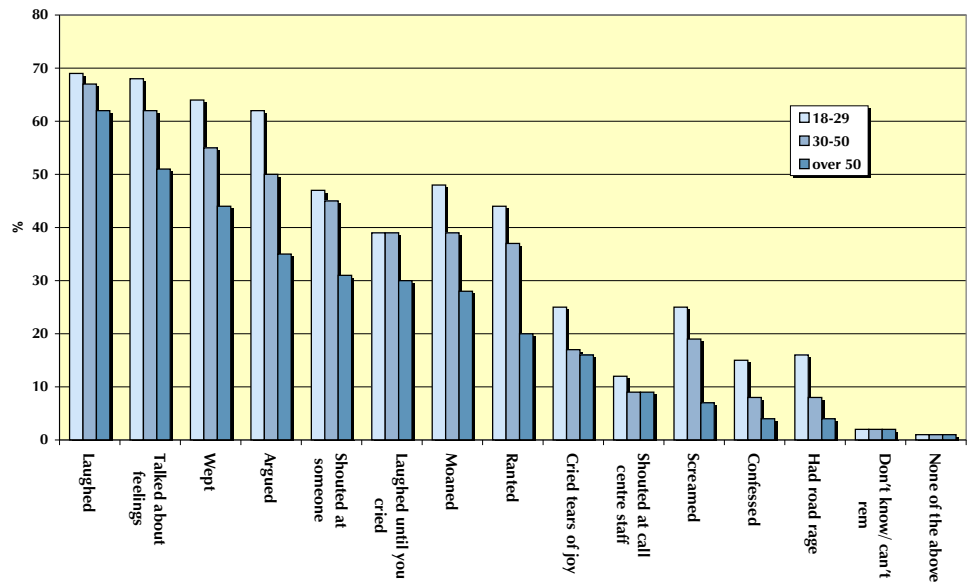
Among our national survey results, responses from 18-29 year olds indicated a higher level of expression of negative emotions, with road rage, ranting, screaming and arguing all polling higher than for other age groups, as shown in Figure 11 below. Nearly two thirds of 18-29 year olds had last 'let it out' in an argument compared to 35% of the over 50s while 44% had ranted compared to 20% of over 50s. Of the younger respondents, 16% had engaged in road rage compared with just 4% of the over 50s.

Over half (52%) of our national survey respondents indicated that they thought their generation was better at 'letting it out' than their parent's generation, as shown in Figure 10 above. There certainly seems to be more talking about our emotions now than in the past. One female participant in her late 50s reflected in a focus group about changes in her lifetime:

*"We never ever talked about our relationships, and this and that and all the angst, we just got on with it. There was no emotional discussion whatsoever. I am now in a relationship with somebody and there is loads of emotional discussion ... in the 1960s people just came together in relationships..."*



Figure 11. How did you last let it out? – by age

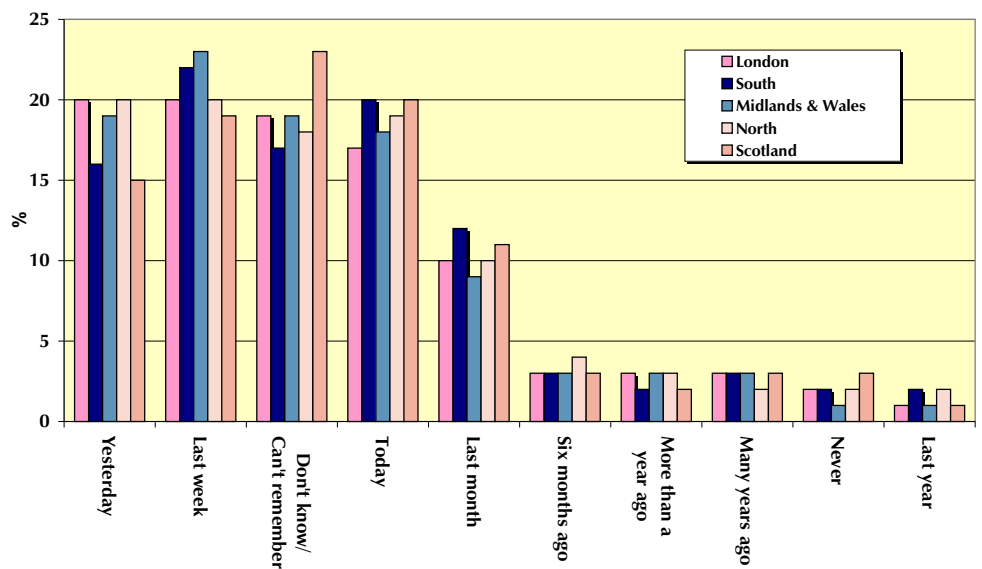


This was reflected in people's responses to the idea of the demise of the traditional British stiff upper lip. One female interviewee's response was indicative of the opinions of many: "No not so much anymore, not as much as it used to be."

**Regional differences**

Our research also indicated some slight differences in peoples willingness to 'let it out' depending of which part of the country they were from. Out of our survey respondents, only 17% of Londoners had 'let it out' in the past 24 hours, while 31% of respondents from Northern Ireland had done so, as shown in Figure 12.

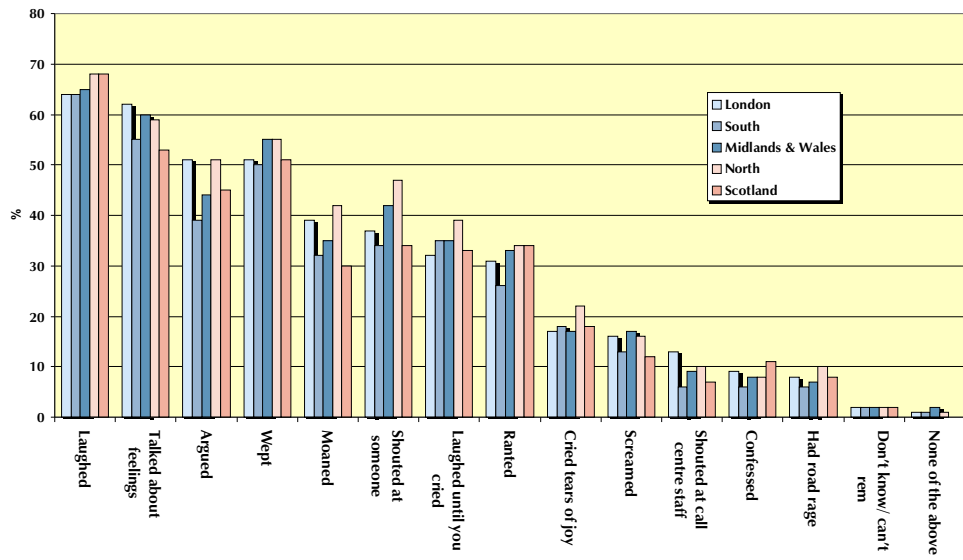
Figure 12. When was the last time you 'let it out'? – by region



**11% of Scots have let it out by 'confessing' compared to just 6% of Southerners.**

On the whole, the Scots came out on top in terms of being comfortable with their own, and other peoples emotions and perhaps surprisingly, 10% of Northerners have 'let it out' to their pets, as shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13. How have you 'let it out'? – by region



## Conclusion

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The results of our research for Kleenex® paints a complex picture of the emotional state of the nation. While we recognise that it often makes us feel better to let it out, our everyday behaviour hasn't quite caught up with the new Zeitgeist. Perhaps this is not such a bad thing. Avoidance, denial, repression and inhibition sound negative but they are necessary characteristics of the way we manage our emotions. We are bound by what are the necessary rules of social reality. Imagine a world full of Big Brother 'Nikkis', alternately raging or weeping, or Gazza's constantly willing to spring forth with manly tears.

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To be 'happy' we need to 'cook the facts': delude ourselves ever so slightly.

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Harvard-based 'Happiness' scholar, Daniel Gilbert, suggests that to find an emotional baseline which allows us to be 'happy' we need to 'cook the facts' or, in other words, delude ourselves ever so slightly. The social bonding fostered by a group moan, the personal catharsis experienced after letting it out, all often bring about positive personal effects and positive social 'affect'. Letting it out, a little bit more, a little more often has the potential to make us all a little happier. At any rate our research suggests that perhaps we Brits are more 'emotionally intelligent' than our stereotype suggests. Given just a few more 'safe outlets' through which to express our emotions we might find a good balance between ourselves as Eeyores and ourselves as emotive Tiggers.

## Executive Summary

- We know that letting our emotions out is a good thing, but we still don't quite manage to do it as much as we think we should...
- 72% of our national survey respondents thought that bottling it up is 'bad for your health', yet less than 20% had 'let it out' in the past 24 hours, with 19% not being able to remember at all the last time they 'let it out'. In terms of emotions, there is something of a gap between what people say *they think they should do*, what they say they do and what they *actually do*.
- ...we remain largely sceptical, if not cynical about 'American' style gushing...
- Give people a 'safe' or appropriate outlet through which to express their emotions, and they will feel more free to let it out.
- Letting it out is most likely to make us feel happy, relaxed, euphoric, relieved and reduces stress ...
- ... but it can also make us feel silly, sad, stressed and embarrassed.
- Brits love nothing better than a good moan. We are highly skilled moaners, about anything and everything as long as it isn't about 'real emotions'.
- The British rule of 'social reality' is an 'Eeyore default'. We are still a nation of 'eeyores' rather than emotive Tiggers. We are good at expressing negative emotions, but not so good at expressing positive ones. 5% of our national survey respondents said Brits were good at expressing positive emotions, while 31% agreed that we are good at expressing negative emotions ...
- ... Sharing a positive, or ideally *negative* emotional experience allows us to bond with people.
- British humour (self-deprecating and sarcastic) provides us with a great subterfuge emotionally.
- With who and how we 'let it out' depends on our age and gender...
- 71% of women have 'let it out' in the past 6 months by crying compared with 28% of men.
- 43% of women have shouted at someone vs 36% of men.
- Men feel that women have a lot of the 'emotional ground' covered to the extent that they are often excluded from feeling free to 'let it out'.
- 38% of women would like to have a packet of tissues with them when 'letting it out'.
- Young people are more likely to let it out by screaming or arguing than their older counterparts. 62% of 18-29 year olds vs 35% of over 50s have argued. 16% of 18-29 year-old vs 4% of over 50s have had road rage. 25% of 18-29 year olds vs 16% of over 50s have cried tears of joy.
- We are better at *talking* about our emotions than in previous generations.
- 11% of Scots have 'let it out' by 'confessing' vs 6% of Southerners.
- Men are twice as likely to 'let it out' to a work superior as women.
- Women, older generations and Scots generally seem better able to let it out more freely, more often.
- We value face to face communication when letting it out: 70% of respondents favour 'letting it out' face to face, with no respondents saying they would 'let it out' by voice mail.
- Some element of a 'stiff upper lip' isn't necessarily a Bad Thing, reining in our emotions has an important social function.
- Finally, we need to kid ourselves and others a little bit...