

The Art of Vulnerability

It's always hard to admit that you might not know something or that you might need a little help. Yet vulnerability is the secret to a happy life, according to new studies on emotional well-being. Caroline Buijs delves into the research.

A few years ago, I experienced three life-changing events in a single year: the birth of my daughter, a move to a new home, and a career change. At the time, I would've preferred to bite off my tongue than admit that I was overwhelmed. Instead, I desperately pretended that everything was going perfectly smoothly by turning on the old "I can cope" act. The mere thought of asking for help engendered a deep sense of shame in me. I didn't want anyone to think I was a whiner, and I wanted so badly to keep everything under control.

THE NEED TO CONNECT

If only I'd known then about the research by American scientist Brené Brown, who's been examining fear, shame, and vulnerability for six years, perhaps I'd have been less hard on myself.

In 2010, Brown gave a poignant and popular Ted Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," in which she made the case for admitting to vulnerability. Over the years, she's conducted hundreds of interviews with ordinary Americans, listened to thousands of stories, and discovered that people who dare to reveal their vulnerability are happier in life and make stronger emotional connections.

Feeling connected is a primeval need, according to Brown, and when people are able to make better social connections, their lives are richer. "Connection is why we're here," says Brown in her talk. "It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it's all about. The ability to feel connected is neuro-biologically essential."

After conducting hundreds of interviews, Brown was fascinated to see that two very distinct types emerged when it came to vulnerability: people with a strong sense of self, who felt connected in positive ways with others, and people

who struggled just to get connected. Those who had trouble making connections, according to Brown, had great fears that they were not worthy of connection. Brown wondered, what do the people in the first group share that explains why they don't have that fear? What determines their sense of pleasurable connection with others and good self-esteem? If she could understand that, Brown thought, then she might find the key to a happy life.

People who connect well, she discovered, have these traits in common:

- * They dare reveal themselves, including that they are not perfect.
- * They have compassion, first for themselves – which is difficult but important – and then for others. You can't be compassionate or show sympathy for others if you aren't nice to yourself first.
- * They are not afraid to be sincere. That means they are willing to let go the image of who they think they should be, and replace that with who they really are.
- * They have the courage to be vulnerable. They believe that what makes them vulnerable makes them beautiful. Not that vulnerability is a comfortable feeling, but they are aware that it is necessary if you want to really connect with other people.

Brown has discovered through her work that vulnerability is the glue that holds relationships together – "the magic sauce," as she calls it. It is daring to be the first to say, "I love you," without any guarantee that you'll hear the same sentiment returned. "Vulnerability is the core of shame, and fear, and our struggle for worthiness," Brown says, "but it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love."

These discoveries came as a surprise to Brown, who admits that she had difficulty revealing her vulnerabilities, taking off her "mask," or relinquishing control. But, according to her own research, that was exactly what she had to do. She put her research aside, she told her Ted audience, and had a small breakdown. She found herself a therapist and spent a year exploring why she had trouble allowing herself to be vulnerable. It soon became a personal quest to discover how she could allow herself "to be seen."

DARE AND DO

When I learned about all this, it brought about a change

for me, too. I realized that, in my case, being vulnerable means, above all, daring to ask for help. I find it difficult, because I believe saying I need help means I'm weak, and I can't let myself be weak. But that year of a new baby, new home, and new job would've been easier if I'd have been willing to admit I couldn't do everything.

Psychologist Fred Sterk, author of *Feeling Stronger: Building Your Inner Strength*, explains that true strength comes from being able to reveal that you have needs, like everyone else. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it's a sign of courage.

"You have to dare to go past that vulnerability, not avoid it," says Sterk. "You can't always be giving; you also have to be able to receive. Dare to raise your hand and ask a question. If you find it hard, you'll have to practice it. Adjusting your beliefs, stepping over the threshold, pushing the limits: that is actually the universal in our lives. And if it doesn't work immediately, you might be taking too big a step. Go back and try a smaller step, but you can't avoid taking such steps in your life. That is, if you want to turn your vulnerability into a strength, into something you can learn from."

SAYING "I DON'T KNOW"

Vulnerability can mean daring to say you don't know, that you are uncertain, that you have doubts. That's not easy in this world, where it seems like everyone always has an opinion about everything. "We've all been in this situation sometime or another, when an important intellectual, the powerful chairman of the retailers association, a prominent man is sitting across the table from you talking nonstop about himself," says writer Maxim Februari, a columnist for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*. "He's happy to go on like this for two hours and then eventually he stops to ask, 'And you, what do you do?'"

The person in this example is obviously very pleased with himself, but in this exchange he's not connecting with you, and it seems like he might actually be trying to push you away, to prevent you from knowing him. At the same time, he's only allowing you to share the best things about yourself, which means it's very unlikely that he'll get to know you, either. If he had admitted that there was anything he didn't know, or that he may not be perfect, then perhaps you could have a two-sided, balanced, conversation.

"We like to present ourselves as perfect," says Sterk. ➔





"We show our storefront to others, putting only the best points of ourselves on display. That means we give and get the wrong impression of each other." Having an intimate relationship means letting other people beyond the storefront and into the home, he says, "because having an intimate relationship means that you get access to the living room, to the bedroom, and to the cellar. That's what intimacy is: being allowed to see more and more of one another. And if you're not used to that, or you live life under the false impression that the rest of the world is perfect, then you've solved the problem of imperfection by avoiding it."

"People who can laugh at themselves are often milder on themselves."

When you look in the mirror, you try to cover up your imperfections and you don't get to learn how to handle the associated emotions. The more you invest in perfection, the harder it is to let go of it."

But it's not necessary to reveal your vulnerabilities to just anyone, advises Sterk. "It's really not safe to do that in every situation, because not everyone will be prepared for it or be capable of dealing with it," he said. It's better to learn to judge when you can and cannot do it safely.

AS RISKY AS FIGHTING FIRES

We tend to think that the places where we most need to be strong are the work sphere and the public sphere, and that it's better to be vulnerable in private and among friends. However, career coach Mariska Knauf says that more and more people are starting to realize that vulnerability is also an asset in the workplace.

"In business, the old ways of management and supervision

don't work anymore," says Knauf. "People now prefer a leader to reveal themselves more. Leaders who know where they're heading, but also dare to admit when they don't, and who are open to suggestions."

Among Knauf's clients is a city fire department. "Firefighters are naturally tough guys and tough women," she says. "But here they sit, talking openly and honestly about what they like and don't like about their jobs, and what they find hard about leadership."

According to Knauf, you really see something developing in the group when someone dares to say, "I'm not so good at x, y, or z," or admits to finding something difficult. Then, she says, you see relief and recognition in the group: "You feel that way, too?" It has a magnetic effect.

But it's always a leap for people to speak openly about their weaknesses in a professional environment, because they're afraid of disqualifying themselves. "They think if they say that they are no good at this one aspect of their job, everyone will think they're no good at anything," says Knauf. "It's unnecessary to feel like that, because a person can be great at many things and just find one little thing difficult. Express it like that: always from the standpoint that you are good enough."

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WEAKNESS?

Now I've learned more about vulnerability, and I'm trying to work at it myself. Every now and then I notice that something has changed. Maybe you know how it goes: you go out drinking with a friend, but the evening doesn't turn out so well. Or you have dinner with a group of people, but there was no real connection. I've now learned that this happens because I haven't been open enough about myself. Nowadays I try to be more frank and open (no matter how hard I find it) about what's bothering me, what I feel insecure about, and truly, I come home with a completely different feeling. Because through my honesty, I connect with people who are in the same boat, and the shame I feel about my weaknesses no longer gets the chance to grow.

What's more, I notice that other people often dare to be more open, too, because they empathize.

But that first step: you have to do it yourself. Like Brown did, and like I'm learning to do. But to do it, I find that I have to first be kind to myself. Sterk says that to be compassionate with others, you first have to be compassionate with yourself. "If you can get there by being kind to yourself, then you're

V Is for Vulnerable

American entrepreneur, author, and public speaker Seth Godin has founded dozens of companies, many of which failed. His book 'V Is for Vulnerable: Life Outside the Comfort Zone' (Portfolio Hardcover, \$16.95) is an alphabet picture book for adults. With entries like "A is for anxiety" and "F is for feedback," Godin shares his philosophies and encourages readers to take risks, and to treat their jobs as works of art. "Vulnerability is the hardest thing to embrace," Godin says in a 2012 interview on Oracle.com. "Only when you put your real self and your real work on display, and expose yourself to feedback, can you say that you're making art."

A Breath of Fresh Air on TV

British journalist and broadcaster Louis Theroux is known for documentaries and television programs in which he follows people in unusual subcultures. In his latest series, "Extreme Love," he visits families with severely autistic children. As a viewer, you get the feeling that he really connects with whoever he's interviewing. His subjects tend to expose themselves completely to him, partly because Theroux is able to reveal his own imperfections, admitting when he doesn't understand something rather than trying to prove he's the expert - which is quite a breath of fresh air on TV. In other words, he has made a career out of daring to show his own vulnerability.

come a long way," he says. "It's hard, because many people have a strict internal critic. I call it unconditional self-acceptance. It's actually a radical idea: I stand up for myself because I know myself the best, I know my vulnerable points and the points I should be ashamed of. Despite them, I accept myself completely."

Or, as Brown says at the end of her Ted Talk, "If we start from the feeling of 'I'm enough,' then we stop screaming and start listening. We're kinder and gentler to ourselves, and then we're kinder and gentler to the people around us." ●

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