

ACCEPTING VULNERABILITY (i): becoming more authentic

'Vulnerability' is a word we rarely use or think about. We experience it all the time but we are usually unaware of its existence.

It shows up everywhere. At the food-court, when our children misbehaved, vulnerability was there. In the office, when we discovered to our horror that we had made a mistake in our report to the directors. At home, when we felt uneasy about our son and his girlfriend locking themselves in his room and we wanted to talk to him. Vulnerability would show up. It would have reared its ugly head. We did not recognise it.

In contrast, we would have been starkly aware of our vulnerability if a lion walked towards us while we were at a bus-stop near the zoo. We would immediately become aware of our defencelessness, lack of protection, the exposure to imminent harm, helplessness and fear. We would have felt totally vulnerable.

Why couldn't we recognise vulnerability in the other examples? It has to do with the false belief we have about vulnerability. *We wrongly believe that to be vulnerable is to be weak.* We believe there is no benefit to be gained from being vulnerable. We do not allow ourselves to feel or look vulnerable or be in any vulnerable position. We have experienced being vulnerable as causing us shame. Like when we were caught unprepared for a meeting. We felt the weight of our colleagues' judgement and our boss' displeasure. In our instinct to protect ourselves, we develop a coping method;- we keep vulnerability at bay, at all costs. We avoid situations that make us feel ashamed or vulnerable.

This happens at the food-court. The children's misbehaviour draws others' attention. We immediately experience vulnerability, feel a 'loss of face'. The thought: 'They will think I am a useless, ineffective parent' gets activated.



Instead of recognising, accepting and harnessing our vulnerability, we resort to self-protection. We whip out our killer-stare, rain down a threat and a hard slap on their heads to take care of the situation that has gone out of hand. We allow the fear, the shame and our anger with the children for putting us in the vulnerable position, to drive our behaviour. This results in our inappropriate management of our children's misbehaviour and their loss of trust in us.

In the office, the signs of vulnerability are all there. We fear rejection. We fear being exposed; 'now my bosses will look at me differently'. Instead of recognising, accepting and harnessing our vulnerability, we resort to self-protection. We may devise a cover-up, leading to more dishonesty and distress.

At home, we feel vulnerable when we fear that approaching the son may cause him to walk out on us. Whether these possible consequences are real or imagined, we avoid recognising, accepting and harnessing our vulnerability. We resort to self-protection. We sweep the issue under the carpet. However, our displeasure, helplessness and frustration build up and cause cracks in our relationship with them.

Other common scenarios we avoid because of vulnerability would be 'public-speaking', 'taking on new or challenging assignments', 'making the first move in a boy-girl relationship', to name a few.

Connect-Point

'If *'Vulnerability is weakness'* is a false belief, what is the truth? The truth is: Vulnerability is like a mirror. It reflects our true selves. The problem is, it reveals to us more than we have the courage to face. That is why our natural instinct is to move away from anything that makes us feel vulnerable. Running away from vulnerability reveals that we fear being seen as a failure. We fear being judged. We fear the opinions of others. We fear rejection, fear experiencing shame, risk and our inadequacy. The truth is: recognising, accepting, and acknowledging our vulnerability will do us more good than avoiding it.

The 3 examples above show us that there is always a trade-off when we choose to self-protect and not accept our vulnerability.

At the food-court, our relationship with the children is compromised when we choose self-protection over seeing the situation as a good teaching moment for them.

In the office, when we choose self-protection over admitting our mistake, our sense of integrity and professionalism are compromised.

At home, the openness with our son and his girlfriend, the peace and harmony in the home are compromised. We may wonder what if having the difficult conversation results in the consequence we fear.

What would have been the chance of this happening if parents, in choosing to accept and acknowledge their fears, and therefore, their sense of

vulnerability, approach their son *in an authentic manner*? If the parents had honestly told the son, "We fear that the issue we are about to bring up may ruin our relationship. Yet if we do not bring it up in the open, it will also affect our current and future relationship." Will the son not appreciate how important he is to his parents more than before?

The alternative to running away from our vulnerability is to be *authentic*. Even if the son reacts badly, the benefits of the parents choosing to be authentic would have outweighed avoiding the conversation to escape vulnerability. Choose authenticity.

When we choose to be authentic, we are choosing to be true and real. We choose to confront ourselves, face up to our fears, and get within ourselves. *It is choosing to live with integrity, honesty, courage and alignment.*

When we accept our vulnerability and work with it, we have a good chance of experiencing true intimacy as the example of the parents and son shows. True connection can come about only when at least one party is willing to be real and vulnerable.

When we accept our vulnerability, we get to know ourselves. We will grow as a person.

If there are benefits in accepting vulnerability, why do we choose to run away from it? What stops us from choosing to be authentic? We mentioned earlier the avoidance of the whole list of fears as being the reason. But behind the fears is actually our low sense of self-esteem and our dependence on pride to boost our esteem. "I need to protect my image in the eyes of others" (who we are is not

defined by how others look at us), and our need for control. "I cannot lose control of the situation" (do we want control but lose being real?)

Choosing to be authentic requires us to put down those instinctive defences. It also requires us to have the '3 selves': self-love, self-acceptance and self-compassion. (*More on this in the next article.*)

In the office episode mentioned earlier, if we have the courage to accept our imperfections and failures as being human, if we can love ourselves and stop judging ourselves, if we can be kind and allow ourselves to make mistakes, we can own up instead of cover up.

In life, we will always find ourselves in vulnerable situations. Knowing now that we can choose to be authentic instead of running away from vulnerability, what will we do the next time we are at the crossroad? Will we choose pride and control or will we choose to be true and real?

If we choose the latter, we change our inner dialogue. We say, "I feel vulnerable. I accept it. I will work with my vulnerability. I choose to be authentic. I show up every time I have made a commitment. I own up every time I make a mistake. I face up to every challenge. I refuse to run away when it matters."

If we do so, we will begin to live with a greater sense of alignment with ourselves and others. We will enjoy a greater sense of freedom and empowerment.

Contact Us

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