

## ACCEPTING VULNERABILITY (ii): through practising self-compassion

Vulnerability is uncomfortable. Doing anything that is outside of our comfort-zone makes us vulnerable. For some, it is approaching strangers. For others, speaking up in a group. And yet others, it is opening up about our feelings. Then there are the times when we mess up, when we make bad decisions or perform badly. That's when we experience vulnerability.

Our instinct to protect ourselves kicks in when we anticipate or are already experiencing vulnerability. We run away from the discomfort. The discomfort is actually our fear, the fear of others' opinions. We fear being seen as a failure. We hate the embarrassment, shame or rejection that we may get or have gotten ourselves into. To cope, we would agree to undertake some tasks, like go to a party alone, where we know no one. We then wriggle our way out like giving excuses or avoiding it altogether. When we mess up, we resort to masking our mistakes, blaming others or defending ourselves. Those are our default ways of coping with vulnerability.

So what's the issue here? Nothing, if we want to stay status quo. No issue, if we are truly alright with our coping mechanisms. However, if we are honest with ourselves, we are tired of not keeping our word. Our cover-up behaviour does not align with who we truly are inside. We want to be able to show up, own up, be reliable and authentic. We want to be able to connect openly and honestly. What's stopping us from these? Our beliefs. A lot in our subconscious is at work against us. This has to do with beliefs about ourselves.

We have unhelpful self-beliefs. Chief of all is the belief that who we are is not good enough. It is true that we often fall short of our own expectations and of others. *It is how we cope with this sense of inadequacy that makes all the difference.* The fear of vulnerability comes from our inability and refusal to accept that sense of inadequacy. So we pretend that we are in control and all is well. (Do we think people can't see through us?) We do not believe that if we admit to our mistakes, accept our vulnerabilities, acknowledge our weaknesses, i.e. be ourselves, we will still be liked and accepted. We work hard at



putting up a front so that no vulnerability of any sort will expose us. Much energy is spent on doing this with little left for enjoying connection with ourselves and with others. It wears us down too.

Is there an alternative? Yes. It is in developing a more authentic and healthy sense of self. This requires a shift in our beliefs. We can't and we won't be seen as 'not good enough' because we have tied our self-worth to how people look at us. We wrongly believe that we are only acceptable when we are worthy. So we have to prove that we are worthy, both to others and ourselves. Hence we strive to be perfect, to be on top of things. But these are false beliefs. The truth is, we, created beings, are inherently worthy. How people see us cannot add to or subtract from our worth. Neither does our performance. What we can or cannot do does not affect our worth.

An authentic and healthy sense of self holds a *realistic view of self*. It recognises that all human beings make mistakes. Mistakes do not make us less worthy. And all human beings can, in our imperfections, continue to journey towards inner changes for self-growth.

The only way to begin this journey is embracing our imperfections. It starts with having a healthy attitude towards self. How? We move away from hiding behind our fronts, proving our worth and fearing our loss of face. We live with a new motto: 'We have nothing to hide, nothing to prove and nothing to lose!' We break from old habits of self-criticism and perfectionism. We form new ones. We practise self-compassion, self-acceptance and self-love.

## Connect-Point

***"Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am brave and worthy of love and belonging."*** (Brené Brown - author of Daring Greatly)

Having self-compassion, self-love and self-acceptance is not the same as being self-indulgent, self-absorbed, being full of self-pity or becoming narcissistic. The latter set of attitudes comes from a place of selfishness and self-centredness. These attitudes exclude others. They are not encouraged. Practising self-compassion, however, comes from a place of self-care. They come with self-kindness, self-nurturing, self-forgiveness and self-empathy. They seek to first connect better with self, take better care of self and then connect with others.

The practice of self-compassion needs to be cultivated. It does not come naturally to us. We may be those who can treat others with compassion. Yet when it comes to ourselves, we are often unforgiving and self-critical. We judge ourselves harshly when things go wrong. If we have been kind and accepting to others, practising self-compassion is just turning that kindness towards ourselves. We speak kindly and gently to ourselves as we would to our friends. We view ourselves with the same patience, understanding and loving-kindness when we mess up or when we don't measure up, as we would to those we love.

For some of us, even showing compassion to others is not easy. We are equally hard on others as on ourselves. The root of the inability may be 'conditioned thinking'.

Take a look at this quote:

*'You are imperfect, permanently and inevitably flawed. And you are beautiful.'*

Does that sit well with you? Do you instinctively feel a sense of misalignment? How much of misalignment we feel reveals the extent by which the environment we grew up in has

unhealthily conditioned us.

Many of us think we are worthy of love and acceptance *only* when we achieve 'success', when we have 'performed well' because of our own growing up experiences. Subconsciously, our love for ourselves and for others becomes conditional too.

We need to debunk and update that belief. We deserve love. Period. We deserve unconditional love, first and most of all from ourselves, regardless of how badly or well we do and what others think of us. It is only when we can truly accord this unconditional love to ourselves that we can really extend the same to others.

When we begin to change the way we perceive ourselves, we move away from perfectionism. We take risks. If we approach strangers and mess up, we applaud ourselves for the effort. We reject the usual harsh self-judgment. Slowly but surely, the fear of being judged, rejected, shamed will lose their hold on us. Vulnerability becomes less daunting. Instead of avoiding it, we use the experience to connect deeper with ourselves and with others. Every vulnerable situation becomes a precious lesson for self-connection, self-growth and other-connection.

We may still not manage every vulnerable situation well despite our shifts. And we may sometimes lapse in our practise of self-compassion. It takes a small beginning, a moment, to make the difference. Do not underestimate small beginnings. A moment's decision to move away from our past ways, can forge a new path to a drastically different outcome. A moment's practice strengthens us for the next, until we become better and better at it. Let the moments build up till they shift us from seeing vulnerability as undesirable to accepting it. Let them lead us to shift from self-judgement and criticism to self-compassion more and more. When moments add up and practice is strengthened, we will become more aligned to our true self.

### Contact Us

For more information on Bethesda CARE Centre's counselling services, please visit <http://www.bcare.org.sg>

To contact us: Please call 6340 4161 or email [admin@bcare.org.sg](mailto:admin@bcare.org.sg)