



# Vulnerability...a Quality of Courage

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To what degree do you mask your vulnerabilities? Have you mastered the art of shielding others from knowing the real you? Or have you embraced and fully exposed your vulnerabilities so the authentic you is on display? Vulnerability is defined as the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally. It is consciously choosing not to hide your emotions or desires from others. In the book, *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown describes vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.” It is that queasy feeling you get when you step out of your comfort zone and lose control. It is when you freely express your innermost thoughts, feelings, opinions, and desires, regardless of the consequences.

As a young child, did you openly share your thoughts and feelings? Were your actions unharnessed with no boundaries? As you grew older, however, did you learn that the world can be a painful place? A place where you must be cautious about what you say and how you act? If so, you are not alone. Over time, people learn that the best way to protect themselves is pull back, retreat, and build walls so they may create a safe space. They act in a manner that pleases others ...an identity that may not be consistent with their authentic self. Let's take a look at a few examples of actions and thoughts that create a fear of vulnerability:

- Putting yourself out there and taking chances that may lead to rejection.
- Revealing mistakes that you have made.
- Sharing personal information that you normally keep to yourself.
- Reconnecting with someone you have had a falling out with.
- Dealing with the emotions of fear, grief, or shame.
- Being honest about what you want in a relationship, including boundaries and expectations.

To embrace vulnerability as a strength, you should know that there are eight unpleasant feelings that you experience – anger, disappointment, embarrassment, frustration, helplessness,

sadness, shame, and vulnerability. Without doubt, vulnerability is the most unique of the eight feelings because of its interplay with the others. It is the sense that you could be hurt. This insecurity is often so strong that you go out of your way to avoid situations that make you feel fragile and out of control. Facing vulnerability takes enormous courage. Why? When you expose your true self without any regard to what others think, you are saying to the world, "This is the authentic me. This is who I am, and I refuse to be anyone else."

For years, I masked the fact that I suffer from a lack of confidence, rejection sensitivity, and fear of failure. As I felt that these were character flaws that would impede my personal and professional growth, I built tools and processes to protect the authentic me. While they masked my flaws, I had a nagging desire to expose my shortcomings. A few months ago, I was asked to speak to 30 or so colleagues at a workshop in Cincinnati. That day, I made the decision that I would reveal the fact that I struggle with triggers that result in fear and trepidation. While I felt uneasy revealing the fact that I am an introvert who is sometimes insecure and fearful of rejection, I let the audience know my hidden secrets. To my surprise, my colleagues embraced my insecurities and moved closer to me. They supported and complimented me for having the courage to be vulnerable.

### Accepting and Embracing Vulnerability

When you accept and embrace vulnerability, you reap emotional benefits including enhanced self-confidence, stronger relationships, and a willingness to take risks. Let's analyze the actions of a handful of people who went through a process of self-examination and went public with their vulnerabilities:

**Carl Nassib.** The Las Vegas Raiders defensive lineman became the first active NFL player to come out as gay, making history and inspiring many others after speaking his truth to the world. In his Instagram post, Nassib stated, "I have been meaning to do this for a while now, but I finally feel comfortable enough to get it off my chest." Nassib's acceptance of vulnerability gained immediate support from Roger Goodell, NFL Commissioner, as well as his teammates.

**Meghan Markle.** On the "Oprah Winfrey Show," the Duchess of Sussex bared her soul as she challenged a centuries-old monarchy fueled by the twin demons of colonialism and racism. All who watched the interview saw that it was her vulnerability that was most compelling. Markle's eyes welled and her voice cracked as she conveyed how living with racism nearly drove her to suicide. Her willingness to raise the royal curtain with conviction and candor has gained the respect and admiration of millions of people around the world.

**Naomi Osaka.** The tennis star withdrew from the French Open after revealing that she had suffered from long bouts of depression since winning her first Grand Slam title in 2018. Osaka commented that "anyone who knows me knows that I'm introverted, and anyone that has seen me at the tournaments will notice that I'm often wearing headphones as that helps me dull my social anxiety." After being fined \$15,000 for not speaking to the media, Osaka had this to say, "I am not a natural public speaker and get huge waves of anxiety before I speak to the world's media." Support from Osaka's fellow athletes has poured in including NBA star Seth Curry who commented on her gutsiness.

**Kyle Beach.** The Chicago Blackhawks draft pick revealed that he was sexually assaulted by video coach Brad Aldrich during the team's run to the Stanley Cup in 2010. "I buried this for 11 years. It destroyed me from the inside out. If these things happen to you, you need to speak up," stated Beach in a television interview. After the assault, Beach used alcohol, drugs, and other "stupid things" to mask his pain. It was not until he learned that Aldrich had also sexually assaulted a Michigan high school student that he had the courage to come forward. The willingness of Beach to reveal his suffering brought admiration and support from millions of people around the world.

## Combatting the Fear of Vulnerability

In your quest to combat the fear of vulnerability, you may wish to consider one or more of the following eight strategies:

1. **Embrace your vulnerability.** Learn to love the authentic you. Everyone has flaws, imperfections, past mistakes, and embarrassing stories they wish they could forget. There is not a person in the world who does not wish that he or she could go back in time and change certain things. To learn to love yourself, begin by acknowledging yourself as a human being – flaws, imperfections, and all. Own and embrace your past mistakes...realizing that they do not define your present or future.
2. **Freely and genuinely express your emotions.** At a young age, you may have been taught not to openly express your emotions. As a result, you purposely bottle your emotions and do not connect with others in a deep, meaningful manner. Tell someone that you appreciate, admire, respect, value, or love them. Emotional intimacy is therapeutic.
3. **Realize the fact that perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield.** Perfectionism is not the key to success. In fact, research confirms that it hampers achievement and is correlated with depression, anxiety, addiction, and missed opportunities. Fear of failing, making mistakes, and rejection sensitivity keep people out of the arena where healthy competition exists. Be wary of your ego and its aversion to being vulnerable.
4. **Try new experiences.** One of the best strategies to combat vulnerability is to experience something new without knowing the outcome in advance. Put yourself out there. Experiences will boost your sense of happiness.
5. **Share intimate details of your personal history.** Through the process of revealing interesting elements of your personal history, you will form deeper emotional connections and greater intimacy with others.
6. **Accept that there are bumps in the road.** Because you are a mortal being, traumas create uncertainty and pain. Suffering, injury, illness, death, and heartbreak are real and constant. You are wise to accept the fact that life is full of ups and downs.
7. **Take responsibility instead of blaming others.** Taking responsibility for your problems is so powerful as it puts you in control of the solution. When you blame others, you are handing over the control to someone else.
8. **Tell someone that they are being hurtful and insensitive.** When another person needles you or treats you poorly, do you suck it up, put on a thick skin, and just grin? Calling another person out when they cross the line makes you vulnerable. If you know what you stand for and can articulate your position, make your feelings and opinions known. It demonstrates strength, courage, and conviction.

When you lean into your vulnerability with openness and compassion, your life will become more fulfilling. Vulnerability... a quality of courage.

### About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, TRA, ASA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for Inc. Magazine's "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.