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The Value of Vulnerability in Relationships

by Emma Allen with Madisen Bird

Due to several experiences with painful rejection, I fear vulnerability.

When you share your whole heart with someone, you hope they will love your soul entirely and will see your value despite imperfections. Unfortunately, I have let the opinion of others about me define my worth once they exit a relationship with me. As a result, I have had moments of considering myself worthless since I am not “good enough” for their love.

During difficult breakups, shame has allowed my demons to attack my weaknesses and devalue my self-worth. However, by coming to know the positive aspects of vulnerability, I now understand how exposing raw emotion is a powerful strength in relationships—not something to be feared. To appreciate the depths and beauty of human connection, we need to embrace vulnerability.

Why Vulnerability Is Feared

When we share more of ourselves with others, our hearts may be devastated when the relationship ends. We are often cautious when it comes to the innermost workings of our heart. Indeed, researchers state that “the dependency and vulnerability inherent in romantic relationships make some degree of caution a necessity.”¹ We tend to avoid vulnerability to protect ourselves. However, as we avoid meaningful connection with others, we may not have the courage to break down the walls necessary to strengthen relationships.

According to researcher Brené Brown who studies vulnerability and shame, “You can’t numb hard feelings without numbing the good.”² Therefore, if personal insecurities get in the way of a willingness to be vulnerable with others, then positive aspects of human connection in relationships may begin to dissipate as well.

When one of my relationships unexpectedly ended, my mind flooded with insecure thoughts. I had given my whole heart to the relationship and was left broken. I instantly felt that if he did not accept me, then who would? In those moments of low self-esteem, fear overpowered love and connection. After this painful experience, I chose to close doors in further relationships in order to avoid further validation of my insecurities. However, this choice only led to an increase in loneliness and fear.

The Value of Vulnerability

After months of processing the breakup, I sought to re-open the door of vulnerability. I trusted family members, a few close friends, and a therapist with the key. I gave them access to hear my pains and struggles with the hope that I would receive love in return. I was surprised to find that when I was vulnerable, I was able to connect with others through their



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similar emotions and experiences. True empathy was expressed in these relationships, and I began to heal.

I found that vulnerability opens us up to deeper connection in our relationships. Brené Brown also states, “connection is why we are here. It is what gives purpose to our lives.”² According to the attachment theory, we all have an innate desire to feel a sense of love and belonging.³ As we develop the courage to be fully authentic and vulnerable with those around us, we begin to feel more secure in our relationships. Expressing my insecure thoughts with trusted loved ones allowed others to love and support me. Rather than feeling judged, belittled, or embarrassed, I felt accepted and understood. I began to realize the moments of understanding and empathy that we crave often start with vulnerability.

How to Be Vulnerable

Although vulnerability is essential in relationships, it is not easy. Through my experience, I found that courage is a key aspect of vulnerability.

When I feel the tendency to close myself off from others, I now try to have courage to be open and express my emotions to those I trust. I push through the initial fear with hope. Brené Brown suggests that we “lean into the discomfort.”² This leaning may be one of the best ways we can become better at being vulnerable. For me, dating is still difficult and full of uncomfortable situations. However, with practice, leaning into the discomfort has opened doors to more meaningful relationships.

In addition, vulnerability involves the ability to first accept your own imperfections and hold the belief that

you are worthy of love. “Taking a vacation from self-blame can be the key to giving yourself the latitude to succeed, even at difficult tasks.”⁴ After my breakup, I experienced an overwhelming amount of self-blame. To combat those feelings, I learned the value of practicing self-compassion and focusing on my individual strengths. Rather than devaluing my self-worth, I choose to embrace the rejection as a way to learn and grow. Vulnerability became empowering instead of debilitating.

Ultimately, we need to understand that vulnerability is not weakness. Without vulnerability, we are less likely to develop the kind of deep and meaningful relationships we seek. We must have the courage to be vulnerable. We must “lean into the discomfort.” For when we practice vulnerability, security in relationships will deepen in new and beautiful ways.



Photo by Pablo Merchán Montes on Unsplash

Endnotes

¹ Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., Griffin, D. W., Bellavia, G., & Rose, P. (2001). The mismeasure of love: How self-doubt contaminates relationship beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(4), 423–436. doi:10.1177/0146167201274004

² Brown, B. (2010, June). *The power of vulnerability*. Speech presented at TEDxHouston, Houston.

³ Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment: Attachment and loss* (vol. 1). New York: Basic Books.

⁴ Whitbourne, S. K. (2016, November 24). The key to overcoming insecurity. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201612/the-key-overcoming-insecurity>