

Brene Brown: How Vulnerability Holds the Key to Emotional Intimacy by Spirituality & Health Magazine

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She may not be a household name just yet, but when you refer to “the woman who talks about vulnerability,” the seven million viewers of her TEDTalks videos know you mean Brené Brown. A research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, Brown has been studying shame, fear, and vulnerability for 12 years. She has presented her findings in three books, on national television, and in lectures across the country. A mix of no-nonsense Texan and best-friend warmth, Brown shines a light into the inner chambers of our hearts—and illuminates a reason to hope. She discusses her new book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, with S&H’s Karen Bouris.

S&H: In your new book *Daring Greatly*, you introduce the idea of a shame-based emotion that seems unique to our contemporary society. One aspect you name is the “fear of being ordinary.”

Brené Brown: The overwhelming message in our culture today is that an ordinary life is a meaningless life unless you are grabbing a lot of attention and you have lots of Twitter followers and Facebook fans who know everything you know. I use the shame-based fear of being ordinary as my definition for narcissism. I definitely see it in younger generations, where people fear they are not big enough. No matter how happy and fulfilling their small, quiet life is, they feel it must not mean very much, because it’s not the way people are measuring success. Which is just terrifying.

So there’s excess, but at the same time, you talk about a culture of scarcity. Can you explain what you mean by that?

The root of the scarcity issue is fear. The questions we are living by—what are we supposed to fear, and who is to blame?—are exhausting for us spiritually, emotionally. Fear consumes an enormous amount of energy in our lives, and to me that’s probably the greatest casualty of the scarcity culture. We are spending so much time and energy being afraid that we are not fully walking into our power and our gifts.

During your 12 years of research, you found people who do feel adequate; you coined the term “wholehearted” for this feeling, a feeling of being enough. How did they arrive at that emotional place?

There are two things they shared in common. The first is a sense of worthiness—they engage in the world, with the world, from a place of worthiness. Second, they make

choices every day in their life, choices that almost feel subversive in our culture. They are mindful about things like rest and play. They cultivate creativity, they practice self-compassion. They have an understanding of the importance of vulnerability and the perception of vulnerability as courage. They show up in their lives in a very open way that I think scares most of us.

How does vulnerability relate to our capacity for joy?

As someone who spent more than a decade studying fear, vulnerability, and shame, I never thought in a million years that I would say that joy is probably the most difficult emotion to feel. It's hard to feel joy because we are so keenly aware that it's fleeting. When we lose our tolerance for vulnerability, we lose the courage to be joyful. Joy is a daring emotion! We are going to let ourselves stop in a moment that won't last forever, that can be taken away. We feel almost that "you are a schmuck if you let yourself feel too deeply because the bad stuff is going to happen."

Is that because we feel undeserving of joy?

I think what drives it, even more than feeling undeserving, is "if I let myself feel this joy, pain will be all that much harder. If I let myself just really sink into the joy of my child, something is going to happen to him or her, and I will be devastated." It comes back to the idea that it's easier to live disappointed than feel disappointed. And yet we are starving for joy. I have never met anyone who doesn't want more joy in their life.

You use a term, "the betrayal of disengagement."

Before I started this research, when someone used the word "betrayal," I thought of high drama, of cheating or mistrust. During the interviews, though, the most hurt and the deepest hurt I saw, over and over, was when people would talk about relationships—whether it was with a friend, a parent, with adult children—where people had just stopped trying. Where at some point, they threw their hands in the air and said, "it's not supposed to be this much work or this hard." Our capacity for wholeheartedness can never be greater than our willingness to be brokenhearted; again, it goes back to the idea that we are so afraid of feeling pain and feeling loss that we opt to live disappointed rather than to feel disappointed. We are never fully in; there is no raw engagement.

A lot of your work examines how humans experience the emotion of shame. Can you explain how shame relates to vulnerability?

If vulnerability is the willingness to show up and let ourselves be seen, shame gets in the way. How can we be authentically known when we are paralyzed with fear about what people might see? Setting boundaries is a great example; it's something that people don't think about as vulnerability, but saying "no" and protecting our time—whether it's family time, our creative time, whatever our self-care time is—that's a huge act of vulnerability in a culture where productivity is so highly valued.

Where does shame come from? Are we born with it?

We are born with the hardwiring for connection, and I think we learn shame. It starts as a parenting tool. It's also a tool for social control; it's a tool in classrooms; it's a tool in synagogues and churches and mosques.

But if it's everywhere, how can we overcome it?

Shame needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence, and judgment. And when you start naming [the cause of your shame] and talking about it with people who have earned the right to hear these stories in your life, it dissipates, because shame only works when it keeps you in this false belief that you are alone. The good news is that the men and women I have interviewed who have high levels of shame resilience share things in common that we can all learn from. (

You first studied women, then men. Did you find that the genders experience shame differently?

Shame is a human experience, but the expectations and messages that fuel shame are definitely organized by gender. I would say that men have a tendency, and this is painting with a broad stroke, but men have a tendency to have one or two responses to shame, which is anger or disengagement. Women have a tendency to turn against themselves. We tend to join the choir of the gremlins and engage in some destructive self-loathing.

Does that shame affect our bodies and health?

I think we carry shame in our bodies just like we carry trauma in our bodies. One of the interesting studies on this was from James Pennebaker at the University of Texas at Austin. He studied trauma, expressive writing, and physical wellness. What he found is that for people who held on to a secret of trauma—because of shame or because of guilt—keeping that secret had a worse effect on their physical well-being than the actual traumatic event.

You share in your TEDTalks and your books about having a breakdown, and you call it a spiritual awakening. What does that mean to you?

For me, it was reconnecting with my vulnerability and letting joy back in my life, practicing gratitude, and letting go of perfection. My faith life is my greatest act and source of daring. I am a believer; I am all in! I believe in God, I believe in the goodness of people, I believe that we are all interconnected by something deeply spiritual and profound that's bigger than us, and so for me, personally, my path to engaging with the world and having the courage to be vulnerable was strictly the result of reconnecting with my faith life.

Is your faith an internal or external expression?

It's fully both. I am engaged in a faith community; I go to an Episcopal church here in Houston, and I am very involved and my family is very involved. That's part of it. But there is the deeper part of it that is just my relationship with God. At one point in my life, the organizing principle was acceptance and approval. Now, the organizing principles in my life are my faith and my values, which are driven completely by my faith. It's about doing my work in service to my beliefs, as opposed to doing my work for gold stars—and I am so crazy about a gold star every now and then! I am not that evolved. However, it's not the guiding principle anymore. I also don't have the fear of failure I used to have. Because of grace. You know, grace allows for failure.

What do you hope people will get from Daring Greatly?

That we need what everyone has to bring to the table. If we are so afraid of what people think, we're not going to show up in the way that we need to show up for ourselves and

for the people around us. We're all in this together, and time is short. So get the show on the road!

—S&H

Stop Shame in Its Tracks

Everyone is going to experience feelings of shame, yet we can become more “shame resilient,” says Brown. She observed that some people have higher levels of what she calls shame resilience, and that this characteristic can lead to deeper connections with themselves and others. There were four traits that she found shame-resilient people had in common, and she shares them with us here:

THEY KNOW WHAT SHAME IS. “They talk about the feelings, they ask for what they need,” says Brown. “And they don’t call it embarrassment, they don’t call it guilt, they don’t call it self-esteem—they call it shame.”

THEY UNDERSTAND WHAT ACTIVATES THEIR FEELINGS OF SHAME. “For example, I can expect to be triggered as soon as I feel like I have disappointed someone or let them down,” she says. “I am going to hear a mental tape playing ‘you are not enough.’ Because I am expecting it, I can greet it and say, ‘I get it, but not this time.’ ”

THEY PRACTICE CRITICAL AWARENESS. Brown might, for example, ask herself, Is it really true that my worth hinges on making someone else happy?

THEY REACH OUT. “I might call a good friend and say, ‘Hey, this guy has been asking me to speak at a conference, but it’s on Charlie’s birthday. I said no and he got upset. I know I did the right thing, yet I am feeling like I am not good enough.’” Shame can’t survive being spoken, says Brown. “Talking cuts shame off at its knees.”