

# The power of vulnerability

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Most of us live our lives behind a set of defences that prevent others from getting too close. These defences are designed to protect us from being vulnerable. As we're brought up to believe vulnerability is a weakness, you may think that having a high wall is the key to leading a fulfilling life.

Not according to Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. In her new book, *Daring Greatly*, she encourages us to challenge everything we know about vulnerability and dispels the myth that it's a weakness or personality flaw. Brown instead argues that vulnerability is an asset and that embracing it is imperative if we wish to truly connect with others and live fully.

In short, those walls that you have built up have to go.

Throughout her career, Brown has been studying human connection. Following thousands of interviews and focus groups, she found that only one variable separated people who had a strong sense of love and those who struggled for it, and that was the belief that they were worthy of this love and belonging. These individuals, who Brown named "wholehearted", also had the willingness to embrace vulnerability.

"I define vulnerability as exposure, uncertainty and emotional risk," explains Brown. "Yes, feeling vulnerable is at the core of difficult emotions like fear, grief and disappointment, but it's also the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, innovation and creativity. When we shut ourselves off from vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives," she says.

Saliha Afridi, a clinical psychologist and the managing director at The LightHouse Arabia: Community Psychology Clinic in Dubai, says that we are all born vulnerable and that over time we find ways in which to protect ourselves from this. "Look at the way children experience joy and pain - it is intense," she says. "They are fully alive, present and vulnerable. However, early in life, through difficult experiences in relationships with parents, teachers, friends and siblings, we start to develop an ego - an armour that has many defences - to protect ourselves," she explains.

"The ego tells you not to share your pain or grief, not to be honest about how you feel because you will get hurt, not to take risks and not to love - all this in the name of keeping you safe. We develop many dysfunctional relationship patterns as a result of putting on the armour," she says.

Rasheda Khatun, a Dubai-based financial and life coach, is someone who has opened herself up to being vulnerable and reaped benefits from doing so. Five years ago, at the age of 26, Khatun was diagnosed with cancer and given six months to live. Following intensive treatment, she recovered. But Khatun then completely suppressed her cancer experience. It was only during her life-coaching training that she started to learn about vulnerability and how to embrace it.

"The more I learnt about celebrating life, the more I realised it was about living fully, and the more I learnt about living fully, the more I realised it was about being vulnerable. In turn, the more I learnt about being vulnerable, the more I realised it is actually where your courage lives."

Following this epiphany, Khatun decided to do something to help spread the message and organised a masquerade ball in Dubai in 2010 to raise money for charity. During the ball, Khatun shared her cancer experience in front of 300 people, which also gave others the courage to share their own stories. "This led to the ball becoming an annual event and to the creation of my charity foundation, Celebration of Life," she says.

Embracing vulnerability does not always have to involve a colossal act of bravery like Khatun's. Brown says that it can be anything from raising your hand at a meeting to offering support to someone who is struggling. So try breaking down some of that wall - you may be surprised by the results.

