

The Power of Being Vulnerable

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Choose to be Vulnerable

Understanding our lifetraps (sometimes also called 'schemas' or 'negative thinking patterns'), and how and why they get triggered, is important in order to understand conflict in our relationships. Which lifetraps do *you* have? What is causing the most harm in your relationship with other people? And how are your lifetraps related to the arguments that seem to repeat over and over again with your friends, colleagues or family?

Typically, when we argue with someone, we have some form of the same fight over and over again. What's worse, it is often not even these people that we are really fighting; i.e., when one or more of our lifetraps gets triggered, we are re-experiencing the trauma of our needs that were not met when we were children that brings us to a place of very old and very great pain. This place is the root of the conflicts that we have with the people around us, so it is this place that needs our attention if we are to create lasting, positive change.

Let's introduce a crucial term to help us overcome the power of our lifetraps: **being vulnerable**. For example, one of the most consistent predictors of divorce is not angry fighting *per se*, but rather arguments and interactions that are full of contempt and defensiveness. When we are vulnerable, we can effectively avoid these toxic qualities. Likewise, in relationships with our friends, family and colleagues, being vulnerable encourages humility, respect, tenderness and courage. It strengthens our healthy side and makes our relationships close. Seeing that being vulnerable is a strength rather than a weakness, those around us now become a source of healing. He/she is a friendly partner, not a sparring partner. The same issues that trigger our lifetraps and make us flare up in anger or withdrawal are the issues with which we need the most help from our friends in order to heal. Being vulnerable is about moving away from patterns of defensiveness, fear, avoidance, and angry counterattacking to a place where we allow those around us (and ourselves) to see us as we really are. We shall now explain this term and how it relates to our healing.

Vulnerability As a Pathway to Healing

When we are vulnerable with those around us, we allow ourselves to be known in a much more intimate way. We will move toward healing as we vulnerably discuss our lifetraps, our coping styles, and their origins. (If you do not feel safe enough to discuss your lifetraps with your small group, then find someone with whom you feel safe to share vulnerably, but work towards being safe with your small group.)

One of the findings in the field of counselling and therapy is that treatment success is the greatest in an atmosphere where the patient or client feels safe and respected. In fact, this is rated to be a more successful predictor than the skill of the therapist or the type of therapy employed. So a safe environment with a group of supportive church friends, such as a small group or Bible Talk or family group, will make all the difference in how well we heal.

Sometimes when we share openly, we may experience an "aha" moment. When this happens, we are getting into what experts call the "child side". We believe that Jesus was talking about this concept in the following passage:

1At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:1-4)

What exactly did Jesus mean when he taught that we should be like little children? Certainly

being childish, immature and undisciplined were not the traits he had in mind. Rather, Jesus meant for us to imitate the godly qualities of a child—the side where we do not put up a front but are transparent about how we really feel and what we really need. This is what we see in children. Children are genuine in their demeanour. If they are angry, it shows. If they are happy, it shows! Jesus admired these qualities in children and taught us to bring back those innocent, genuine feelings that have been tucked away, hidden within us all.

Different experts have seen the value of getting in touch with our child side. Drs. Alice Miller, Donald Winnicott, and Emmet Fox all taught that we should experience the child side of ourselves, or our true self. Dr. Charles Whitfield defines the child side as “who we are when we feel most authentic, genuine or spirited.”

Our child side experiences the feelings of joy and pain, and wants and needs to express these feelings without fear or judgment. This is seen clearly in young children. It is one of the reasons why they are so endearing. We don't completely lose our child side, even as adults; we only become good at hiding it. This child side is who we truly are. It is the side that expresses what we need, when we are weak, when we are happy and contented, when we are sad, and when we are afraid. When children start experiencing unhealthy guilt or shame or fear at a young age, they are usually at a loss, not knowing how to cope with these emotions. Often, the people who induce such feelings of unhealthy shame, guilt and fear are our parents, and some of them are grossly ignorant about healthy parenting skills and principles. In fact, Dr. Virginia Satir and Dr. Felitti, pioneers in family therapy, found that between only 5-20% of the population receives a healthy amount of guidance, love and nurturing. The remaining 80-95% of us do not. As a result, most people grow up with feelings of unhealthy guilt, shame or fear from a young age.

When needs are not met, a child develops a false sense of who he/she is. Children rely on their parents to meet their core needs. When a child does not feel loved and accepted by his/her parents, or when the messages he/she receives are negative, the child is powerless to know that these messages are false. Since these negative messages get repeated over and over, the child comes to believe them, and accepts them as the truth about himself/herself. Lifetraps develop. The more powerful the negative messages and life experiences are, the more powerfully the lifetraps will develop. For example, if a child is constantly criticised and made to feel incompetent, or asked to do things beyond his/her ability, the defectiveness lifetraps will develop. (Some of you may know Dorothy Law Nolte's poem, “If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn...”).

As adults, we carry these lifetraps forward into our definition of ourselves. They become the inner truth of who we are. Rather than seeing ourselves as truly lovable, having intrinsic value and being acceptable as we are (created by God), we struggle with false understandings of ourselves. In order to manage the pain and fear these lifetraps cause us, we develop a false front in the form of unhealthy coping styles that hide our needs and desires. As adults, we are so in the habit of using our coping style(s) to respond to our fears, we no longer know we are shutting ourselves off from our innermost thoughts and feelings.

Eventually, with repetition, our child side gets completely hidden and comes out only here and there, but our false side has now become a very natural part of our makeup and personality. It is deeply embedded in us, and the more we rely on this side of ourselves, the less we are in touch with our child side.

Moreover, as adults, our vocabulary is more extensive than when we were children, and we know what to say to confuse people and deter them from getting to our child side. As a result, little healing takes place. When we don't nurture our child side, the false unhealthy coping style takes over. This coping style is not our true inner self. When Jesus tells us to be like a little child, we believe that he is calling on us to bring out our child side, which is genuine, sincere and teachable. This side comes out when we are vulnerable. Believing the false truth of our lifetraps and using our coping styles will only prolong the pain and keep us from healing.

For example, when we quarrel with the people around us rather than being vulnerable, we might act tough and pretend that we don't need anyone and that we are fine. This is an avoidant coping style. In our avoidant style, by being busy, we keep ourselves detached from our true child side. Our coping style of avoidance may put us on the path of getting involved in an addiction or being a workaholic. Whatever it is, it will prevent us from being in touch with our real self, our child side.

When feelings of guilt or shame arise, some of us counterattack in order to protect ourselves. Since we are not being vulnerable, the child side is hidden, but a false angry side comes out instead by way of the counterattacking coping style.

Then there are those of us who are surrendered because we hear a critical parent voice and give in, thinking that everything is our fault. While this may not lead us to start a volatile quarrel the way a counterattacking coping style would, we are still not vulnerable, so the child side of us stays tucked away. We often confuse this reaction with humility, but if we were truly being humble, we would not be the focus of attention. Whatever our coping style, we have learned to respond to pain by hiding our inner self, the child side, and have become accustomed to a façade.

When we start being vulnerable, we will suddenly feel confusion, fear, excitement, sadness and even anger. When this happens, it is actually good news. We are finally getting in touch with our child side! However, many people will give up at this point because they feel awkward and hurt. It is easier to stay in touch with their old, false self and the coping style to which they have been accustomed for so long. They would rather stay with the *familiar* than move towards something that is *healthier*.

As we practice being vulnerable, we should not let the awkward feelings dissuade us from pressing on. We should not succumb to our fear, rather, we should allow ourselves to feel our old fears, and look to those around us to help us feel safe and comfortable. This can be a place of real healing rather than the false place of relating through our lifetraps and coping styles. If we feel more comfortable writing instead of talking and sharing, it is fine to do so, as long as we are being vulnerable. In the case of a spouse, once we are able to be vulnerable we will feel a Love Connection like never before. It is such a wonderful place to be, but it takes humility and courage. We can take responsibility for our own healing. It may take a while. We may need to have a "do over" now and again, but with each attempt, we will get closer and closer to being healed. When we say being healed, we mean getting healed emotionally and mentally, and spiritually, and as a result, attaining a sense of peace.

All of us, from every corner of the globe, yearn for this kind of peace – the rich, the poor, the young and the old. The alternative is holding in our feelings until they become unbearable. How is that a better option? Our feelings have a way of coming out, whether we like it or not. Somehow they will come out, through our present unhealthy coping style, which may lead to all sorts of self-destructive behaviour, including dependence on alcohol, smoking, or sexual promiscuity, or through counterattacking in our relationships with others. While this is happening, we may feel numb as we go about our routine. We will not feel quite as alive. Our child side is the energetic side that is waiting to come out. It has to be drawn out carefully, through being vulnerable.

Men are notorious for frowning at the thought of being vulnerable with their spouse or with a small group. Usually they view this as girl talk. They laugh, and look down on such things, but truthfully, it is their avoidant side that is reacting. Little do they realise that suppressed feelings lead to stress, distress and illness, simply because this part of them is not liberated. They end up experiencing less personal growth, and miss out on how wonderful it is to get in touch with their child side.

As comfortable as we may be with our false self (coping style), it is not able to help us get healed, by virtue of it being *false*. Only the child side, the true self, can take us to a healthier place. Staying with the false messages of our lifetraps through our coping styles will only prolong the

pain and hold back the healing. They function to hide our child side. So, let's get our child side out and be vulnerable! Whitfield says that most of us expose our child side for only about 15 minutes a day! The other times are filled with the false self, and our unhealthy coping styles.

Whether with our spouse or with other safe friends, it is time to get started. We should be patient with each other and help each other go through this process. This is what love for each other is all about; making the effort to help our selves and others change, as Dr. M. Scott Peck defines love in his book "The Road Less Travelled":

(Love is) the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.

In close relationships, love is not only acting on a feeling; it is a decision we make based on what is best for our best friends and ourselves. When we commit ourselves to loving others in this manner, there will be growth on both sides. Love, looked at in this way, means creating the kind of environment that is able to nurture growth in ourselves and in the people in our small groups. It may be uncomfortable at first to be vulnerable, but the feelings will change. Having explained how being vulnerable is related to meeting the needs of our child side, let's get specific and talk about how to be vulnerable.

How To Be Vulnerable

When it comes to communicating in a vulnerable way, we like to think of being vulnerable as having three or four components: sharing our weakness, our feelings, our need, and apologising where necessary.

Sharing our weakness means sharing gut-wrenching soul baring information without fear of how we are perceived. This is the hardest part! Instead of reacting when we are triggered, we need to take stock of what is being triggered and then admit our weakness. While this is being done, those around us need to listen and understand our feelings without jumping in and lecturing or giving solutions. This is embarrassing, humbling and difficult, and may in turn trigger more defectiveness, but we must press on and share vulnerably. Healing will take place once we admit our weaknesses, not when we hide behind the mask of our typical coping style. An example with a fellow member of our small group would be: "I felt angry last week when you made that comment. In hindsight, I can see that it was because I felt guilty for not being home more for the, and I became insecure that you thought I wasn't a good Christian. My defectiveness got triggered."

Sharing our feelings respectfully means that instead of being rude and angry, stuffing or sulking, we honestly share our pain and hurt, as lovingly as possible. "To be honest, my ego got a bit bruised when I *thought* you meant that I wasn't a good Christian. However, I am sorry for my rudeness."

Expressing our need means that we ask for help, rather than being demanding. This works best in a gentle tone of voice. We can express what the partner could have done that would have been more helpful. "Maybe it would help me if I could hear you being more appreciative of the times I do things well, so that I don't feel that you 'never notice' the good things I do. However, that is no excuse for my outburst!"

Apologising when necessary is just that—if there is something for which we need to apologise then this is the time to do it. As you see in the two paragraphs above, the last sentence in both examples is an apology. Humility is always endearing, not to mention Christ-like!

Bear in mind the following:

- We must see those around us as people who need us and whose needs we are able to meet.
- Those around us are human. They have weaknesses, just as we have. They have their own hurts. Let us have feelings of compassion for the people in our lives.

- We should accept those around us for who they are, knowing that over time, we can grow into stronger relationships in which we are better able to meet each other's needs.
- "...Change and become like little children..." Vulnerability can bring tears of refreshing... Experience a renewed sense of unity and closeness as you connect with others.

Now that we have learned how to communicate in a vulnerable way, we can be vulnerable with each other to overcome the power of the negative and false message of our lifetraps.

To summarise, being vulnerable helps us by:

- i) Weakening our lifetraps
- ii) Bringing out our child side
- iii) Helping those around us to meet our needs as they hear our child side
- iv) Not triggering lifetraps or coping styles in us or others

Since being vulnerable is so crucial to the healing process of having our core needs met and weakening our lifetraps, we would like to give you some examples of how to be vulnerable when your lifetraps are triggered.

Remember that being vulnerable means:

- Expressing your weaknesses and fears
- Expressing your feelings respectfully
- Expressing your needs
- Apologising when necessary

The Difference between *Being Vulnerable* and *Being Open*

Being open is often confused with being vulnerable, but there is an important difference that must be made clear. When we vent our feelings without inhibition or concern for those listening, this may be seen as being 'open' but it is far from being vulnerable. In fact, it may be quite a harsh and unfair way to approach being heard. By contrast, being vulnerable incorporates the concepts of expressing weaknesses and fears in a very personal way. It also involves expressing feelings in a respectful manner that does nothing to diminish the validity of others' feelings. In this way, being vulnerable is neither attacking nor submitting – it is an active process in which you aim to be understood by a willing and attentive listener. Being vulnerable is related to, but not limited to, the concept found in Paul's passage about 'speaking the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15). For many of us, being genuinely vulnerable may require a mind change, however we should take solace in knowing that we are not alone in this.

⁷Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)

As we read above, in Matthew 18 Jesus stressed the importance of being like a child. We have also discussed the differences between being open and being vulnerable. The following exercise will help people practice the elements of being vulnerable to become connected on a deeper level.

SCENARIOS

Five mock scenarios involving a small group leader and his/her members:

1. When a small group leader is concerned about a group member not being a team player

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I know I am not the best Bible Talk leader, and I sure don't think I am perfect. I'm such a worry wart leader, I even feel abandoned when the group doesn't operate as a team. Jokes aside, it does matter to me that we work like a team. You have

a lot of great gifts and if you use your gifts in this group, I can see that the group can really benefit.

Apologising when necessary

I am sorry if I have done anything that was not helpful, perhaps not making your role clear enough, or if I led in such a way that I hurt you. Please let me know so that I can repent and we can get that cleared up.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

I feel that when you don't play your part we will get weaker as a group. I feel like I am on the other side and it makes me feel sad not being together with you. It matters to me that we work like a team. So how about it...?

Expressing your needs

I really want us to be a team. I need you. Your involvement is crucial.

2. When someone is avoiding getting close to others in the small group

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I know I am not the best when it comes to relationships, and for all I know you guys have been thinking of ways to tell me things about how I stink as a friend...

Expressing your needs

I need you all to be my friends. I don't have very many close friends. When I chose this group I decided to be close to you all. I need your friendship. I can't do this alone. All of you are important to me.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

I don't quite feel connected with you because our relationship is not deep. I know that I want this relationship to work and without this I will feel lonely and isolated. I do not want to feel lonely and disconnected. It makes the group superficial and I want it to be deep and genuine.

Apologising when necessary

I'm sorry if it hasn't been easy for you to make new friends in this group. Tell me how I can help you to feel more comfortable.

3. When someone doesn't seem to want to pray with others

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I think this group can be so much stronger if we pray together more often as God is the one who works through our ministry. When God is right in the centre I feel so excited and fired up, but when we don't rely on Him then I fear what might happen. I know that in the past when I personally did not rely on Him, I saw fewer and fewer miracles. I know that God wants us to connect with him.

Expressing your needs

I'm sure that you think that prayer is important, but sometimes it comes across that you don't want to pray with us, so I get hurt when you turn down opportunities to pray with us. I feel that our group is weak, and we are not powerful without God.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

Just like in Acts 1:14, where everyone was united in prayer, I think God will bring us all closer together if we dedicate more time to Him in prayer. I feel we need each other, and when we are united in prayer as a team it will be all the more powerful.

Apologising when necessary

I'm sorry if I've been a bad example of this in the past. I really want to change, and I want you to help me as well.

4. When someone struggles constantly with not being punctual

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I'm afraid that our Bible Talks aren't popular with visitors, because we usually seem to be waiting for one of our members to arrive. When we are all punctual it makes me feel excited because it shows that we are all serious about the group.

Expressing your needs

I feel that it is disrespectful to the group and to our visitors when we regularly show up late. I need us all to play our part. If we all take this seriously then it will be a good example to our visitors.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

We are all part of the same body, so we need to be on time for all of our gatherings – church, devotionals, BTs, bible studies and D-group. When several people are late I feel a bit sad and alone, and even though this isn't true, it makes me feel that I am the only one taking the bible talk seriously.

Apologising when necessary

I'm sorry if I didn't set the perfect example. I'm trying to change, and I've realized that I need to call everyone higher in this respect

5. When someone is not participating in group activities

Expressing your feelings respectfully

I want this group to be the kind of team where everyone is active and playing an important role.

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

When we don't all participate I feel insecure that maybe you do not like our bible talk.

Expressing your needs

It seems that you've distanced yourself from the fellowship and don't want to join in. That may not be true, but it seems that way. I also get the feeling that when I contact you, you don't really want to talk about your lack of participation. I have to admit that it makes me feel that I am not doing a good job leading and that you might be bored. I am sorry for my shortcomings; I want to be open to your feedback. If we all participate then I truly believe that our group can achieve so much.

Apologising when necessary

I am sorry for not bringing this up to you earlier. I was worried about how you would take this feedback, but I have come to realize that I need to be honest about my feelings as well.

Five small group scenarios involving being vulnerable with your feelings towards your small group leader:

1. A member feels that her Bible Talk leader is moody. "One minute she's giving, the other minute I don't know what she's thinking."

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I'm afraid that we've gotten off to a bad start this year and it's affecting the morale in our group. Our group chose you to lead us, but when you go through difficult times and are not vulnerable with us, it makes me feel that perhaps you do not want us. I want to feel secure and connected. When we are connected, it helps our whole group to be closer.

Expressing your needs

Perhaps you are going through a lot in life and I don't know about it... That's partly why it would help if you could be more open with the group.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

You're very dear to me, and I think you're a great leader. I just need you to communicate more about what you want us to do and how we can be closer.

Apologising when necessary

(An apology may or may not be needed... case by case basis)

2. A member feels that the Bible Talk leader counterattacks and has been harsh

Expressing your feelings respectfully

Thanks for wanting to get with me and to hear about my feelings. I really care about the unity of our group and I am touched by how much you care, too. I guess I must have done something to have triggered you, and I really want to know what I did wrong. At the same time, I want you to know that I was hurt by our last interaction. I felt that you have something against me, perhaps you do not even like me. These feelings may not be right, but I did have them and it triggered me to react. I also know that I do not want to stay this way and that if I can see your view point, perhaps it will help me to look at this differently. I care about our unity.

Expressing your weakness and fears

One area I am weak in is the way I may very well misinterpret other people's responses. I tend to think the worst of them and this is my issue; it's not yours. Unfortunately, my father was harsh. I grew up in a hostile environment and I guess that was how I developed this weakness of being hypersensitive. I need you to still understand my issues and if I know that you do, then I will get better connected with you. I apologize for my reactions, too.

Expressing your needs

I need you to help point out my weakness because when you do so, it will help me gain awareness and grow. At the same time, I am sensitive, perhaps too sensitive, and when you come across too strong, it gets my thoughts going in all kinds of different directions. I need you to still help me with my issues but to come across more gently. When you do that it will be so much more effective and I know I will take your feedback better.

Apologising when necessary

(An apology may or may not be needed – in this case it was already expressed above)

3. A member feels that the Bible Talk leader is generally judgmental

Apologising when necessary

I'm sorry that I didn't come and ask you for help before.

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I'm afraid that I haven't done a very good job leading the bible studies with Martha. I really want you to give me input.

Expressing your needs

In addition, I want to feel connected with you and my relationship with you is important to me.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

However, when you make comments like you did yesterday, it makes me feel sad and feel that I don't fit into our group. I know that I could do things better, so it would help me a lot if you could take the time to talk with me instead of coming across in a way that is putting me down. When I feel put down, it's harder to take the input. I'd be really grateful if you could give me more input, but in a way that does not make me feel judged.

4. A member feels that the Bible Talk leader has a hard time accepting input

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

I respect you as a leader and I'm very grateful for your strong points, and at times I'm afraid that my contribution is not that important. On the other hand, when everyone gives their ideas, I feel excited that we are working as a group. I know that it is challenging to lead us all, but I feel excited when we are all able to contribute.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

I think the group has been very successful in terms of growth, but I feel like you take on too much of the burden yourself, and that you sometimes might not want constructive feedback.

Expressing your needs

I like to see our group working as a team. This also helps everyone work on their leadership skills.

Apologising when necessary

(No apology necessary)

5. A member feels that the Bible Talk leader seems to be too agenda-oriented, while the members want more friendship

Expressing your weaknesses and fears

While our group has grown to be more focused in accomplishing tasks, I fear that we are spending less time to enjoy each other's friendship. I realise that it is challenging for you as a leader with so much that needs to get done and with so little time. However, I fear that when we do not spend enough friendship time with each other, our friendship will suffer. I know when I don't feel emotionally close or connected with you that I tend to feel sad or even feel you don't want me in the group. You are important to me and I don't wish to feel this way. I love you, and I love our group. I love it that you are a very focused leader and our group is a focused group. I just would like for us to deepen our friendship so that we know more about each other and our needs.

Expressing your feelings respectfully

I respect you as my leader and know that you have made a lot of sacrifices to lead the group. I notice that as we spend less time building our friendship, the group is losing its zeal to serve as begin to view everything as a 'to do' list. I feel that the lack of refreshing friendship time has caused us to do things not as something we look forward to, or want to do. Rather, it has become a checklist...something we 'have to' do. I hope our group can have fun doing things together, that our motivation would come from within our hearts.

Expressing your needs

Growing up, I never really had a relationship with someone who took time to care about me as a person. I have experienced that after I joined the group. That is why friendship is precious to me. I need to feel that our friendship will still be cherished and important even as we become busier with life, and have more tasks to accomplish.

Apologising when necessary

I apologise that I have, on several occasions, not been supportive of you when the group meets together. I felt that our meetings seemed so much like work. I should have approached you earlier to express my needs to you rather than drag my feet whenever we meet. I am sorry for that!