

# THE POWER OF BEING VULNERABLE

## **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 get 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:

*<sup>1</sup>At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” <sup>2</sup>He called a little child and had him stand among them. <sup>3</sup>And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Therefore, 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 realize 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 apologizing 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 family, 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!"

*Apologizing when necessary* is just that—if there is something for which we need to apologize 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 summarize, 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
- Apologizing 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.

*<sup>7</sup>Get 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. <sup>8</sup>Therefore 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.