



Chronic Illness and Vulnerability

By Tod E. Fiste, MFT, LPC

One of the common aspects of having a debilitating illness or medical condition is a greatly increased sense of vulnerability. When there are things you cannot do for yourself, you are necessarily more dependent on others. This can have profound effects on your sense of identity, confidence, and self-worth.

The more strongly your identity is linked to seeing yourself as strong and independent, the more likely you are to perceive increased vulnerability as decreasing your self worth. This likelihood is increased when you live in a culture where independence, strength, and individualism are highly valued, as tends to be true in the U.S.

There are good reasons to question the belief that vulnerability equates to weakness, as researcher Brené Brown does in her book "**Daring Greatly**: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead" and in her popular [Ted Talks presentation](#). She argues very eloquently that the ability to be vulnerable is fundamental to creating and maintaining intimate relationships. As such, vulnerability is not a weakness. Rather, the courage to be vulnerable forms the foundation of our relational lives.

Of course, the vulnerability you experience due to a medical condition is not perfectly equivalent to the vulnerability you experience in an intimate relationship. Yet I would argue that one of the biggest apparent differences – that vulnerability due to

illness is imposed on you, while you chose to be vulnerable in relationship – is largely illusory.

There is an American mythology regarding the "rugged individual." As a counselor I have heard many people say that their biggest problem is caring what other people think or feel about them. The reality, however, is that needing relationships with others is basic to being human. This fact has been validated by many recent findings in neuroscience. (For a great read on this, check out the book "**A General Theory of Love**" by Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon.)

Intimate relationships are necessary for a healthy, happy life. So if vulnerability is a necessary ingredient for intimate relationship, then it follows that the ability to be vulnerable is not optional if you want to be healthy and happy. From this perspective, a debilitating illness may make your vulnerability more apparent, but it doesn't make you fundamentally different from those who are "healthy."

Our culture's emphasis on individual independence leads to a great deal of denial about our vulnerability. This can lead to rejection of people whose vulnerability can't be easily ignored or denied, such as those with a chronic illness, since this reminds others of their own despised vulnerability.

Yet when we stop denying our vulnerability it can actually bring us together. It is something we all share as

human beings. There is a certain amount of fragility and uncertainty inherent in being human, and when we accept this we can view ourselves and others with compassion. Compassion and acceptance are therefore gifts that can arise from acknowledging vulnerability.

Rather than simply being a burden on others, people with chronic medical conditions can provide others with an opportunity to heal and grow their relationship with their own disowned vulnerabilities. Those who develop greater compassion and acceptance through illness-inspired self work can be valuable teachers to others living in undeserved shame of their own imperfections.

Dealing with a chronic illness is unquestionably a challenging path to walk. Don't forget that the vulnerability inherent in walking it gives you more in common with others rather than less, and that the courage you develop to accept that vulnerability is its hard gift to you and your gift to others.

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