



*Communicating Deeper*

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**Vulnerability & Shame**

CCC Course - Week 2

“There is no intensity of love or feeling that does not involve the risk of crippling hurt. It is a duty to take this risk, to love and feel without defense or reserve.”

-William S. Burroughs

Shame and vulnerability have an immense impact on our marriage relationship. The first, always a negative impact and the second is variable, meaning vulnerability can cause damage or build bridges of connection.

Let's start out by defining vulnerability. But to understand that, we must understand the importance of connection. Professor Brené Brown of the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work has spent over a decade studying, among other things, vulnerability.

She said, “Connection is why we are here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives!” Connection to others is what brings us the greatest joy and satisfaction. The dichotomy is that it can also bring us the most sorrow and frustration because, to be truly connected to someone else, you must be willing to open your whole heart and be vulnerable to being loved as well as being hurt.

In a TEDx talk, Brown said, “Vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, but it appears that it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love.”

Shame is a fear of unworthiness and of letting others see our true selves. It is embarrassment about our weaknesses and insecurities, as if we are the only ones who have them! Those who have a strong sense of love, belonging, and worthiness *believe* they are worthy of love and belonging. They are able to open their whole hearts and connect with others. They are willing to allow their hearts to be exposed to the uncertainty of being unprotected in a relationship.

Here is a great analogy about vulnerability. The youth in the Boy Scouts of America organization learn a special hand shake, except they use their left hand instead of their right hand which is culturally the normal one to use. This stems from a story of warriors on a battlefield who would drop their shields when meeting up for a truce with the enemy. They held their shields with their left hands. So by dropping their shields to shake left hands with the enemy, they were in essence saying, "I trust that I am safe in dropping my shield. I trust that you will NOT kill me." These warriors were literally exposing their hearts, the most fragile organ of the body both physically and emotionally.

Why would we resist being vulnerable and feeling pain and hurt to feel deep, immense joy? We would often rather numb the negative emotions of shame, disappointment, grief, fear, or embarrassment.

We live in a vulnerable world. There have never been as many indebted, obese, addicted, and medicated adults in American history. Perhaps these problems are an attempt to numb vulnerability. You can't selectively numb the bad emotions with a few alcoholic drinks, overeating, or a shopping spree. When you numb the negative emotions, you are also numbing the positive emotions of joy and gratitude. Then you become even more miserable and scramble to find purpose and meaning in your life.

Vulnerability shows up in many ways in our lives. Perhaps a wife is ill and doesn't want to ask her husband to help out for fear of overburdening him. A husband doesn't want

to initiate intimacy with his wife for fear of rejection. A man doesn't ask a woman on a date for fear of being turned down. You delay an important discussion because you are waiting for your spouse to be in the "right mood" to discuss it. There is something wise about that! However, it is the fear and holding back that keeps us from deepening and strengthening our relationships.

What causes us to hold back from being more vulnerable? Why would we close up our hearts with a huge DO NOT ENTER sign? Here are a few possible reasons.

- \*Fear of rejection
- \*Fear of loss
- \*Anger – a secondary emotion
- \*Selfishness/Self-centeredness/Pride
- \*Fear of judgment
- \*Feeling unworthy of love
- \*Feeling unworthy of belonging
- \*Inability to forgive others
- \*Guilt
- \*Shame

We'll share a little about the last one on the list – shame - now before going to your recommended exercises for strengthening your marriage this week.

When we are feeling vulnerable, it can trigger shame. First, let's talk about what shame isn't with the idea of shame versus guilt. Shame is a sense that we are bad that there is something about us that makes us unworthy of love, acceptance and belonging. Guilt is not a sense of who we are but something we have done. Shame, "I am bad." Guilt, "I did something bad." Shame is a focus on self. Guilt is a focus on behavior.

Let's take the example if someone stayed up really late partying and got to work late and feeling awful his self-talk might be: "I'm such an idiot and loser." Focusing on self is shame.

"I can't believe I did that. That was a really stupid thing to do. I did something that doesn't fit with who I want to be" are statements that are guilt-driven and focused on the behavior.

Guilt is helpful. It holds what we have done up against who or what we want to be. It leads us to make amends, say sorry and improve ourselves. You are not defined by the behavior, the bad choice.

If you did something that was hurtful, how many of us would be willing to say, "I'm sorry"? Hopefully, most of us would if we realized someone may have felt hurt from our words or actions.

Shame is not "I'm sorry, I made a mistake." Shame is "I am a mistake." It's a feeling or thoughts that there is something profoundly, deeply wrong with who I am.

Outcomes around shame and guilt are intensely different. Shame is highly correlated with addiction, depression, bullying, eating disorders and violence where guilt is being able to separate who we are from bad choices. An addict needs shame like a dying man needs saltwater! Shame the cause, NOT the cure!

Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable – it's the total opposite of owning our own story and feeling worthy.

Brené defines shame like this:

"Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."

"Shame keeps worthiness away by convincing us that owning our stories will lead people to thinking less of us. Shame is all about fear. We're afraid that people won't like us if they know the truth about who we are, where we came from, what we believe, how much we're struggling, or, believe it or not, how wonderful we are when soaring (sometimes it's just as hard to own our strengths as our struggles)."

I love a true story that Brown shares from her research that explains the difference between humiliation and shame with the variable being feelings deserving and worthiness. She talks of a girl in school one day anticipating her score on the graded papers the teacher is handing out. There was a single paper left in the teacher's hand after handing out the papers.

"Who didn't get a paper?" the teacher bellowed. "I'm asking who did not get a paper?" Susy cautiously raises her hand. "I see Susy didn't get a paper. How many of you are surprised that Susy didn't get a paper?" No response from the class. "I said, how many of you are surprised Susy didn't get a paper? The teacher slams the paper on Susy's desk and says, "I'm going to help you out. If you don't put your name on the paper, I will help you out!" The teacher then writes S T U P I D on the paper.

Susy self-talk: "That is the most rotten horrible teacher! I didn't deserve that." That is humiliation. But if self-talk is "I'm so stupid. Why am I so stupid?" That's shame, believing you deserve the ridicule. A humiliated Susy would come home and tell parents or friends that she didn't deserve to be treated that way. A shamed Susy would have nothing to report. **This is bad because shame likes to HIDE.**

Embarrassment is when you know that you are not alone. Like calling someone by the wrong name because it's pronounced differently than you think. You know you are not the only one because others make the same mistake. **Shame makes you feel completely ALONE.**

Guilt is helpful and leads us to make amends, say sorry and improve ourselves. Shame corrodes the parts of us that help us feel like we can be better! **Shame makes us feel there is nowhere to go from there.** If you are a liar, there is nowhere to go from there. You are a liar!

Shame is in a hole so deep and dark, and we can't see anywhere to go besides be stuck in this deep dark place.

May you discover ways to rid yourself of shame and open up to the possibility that it is safe to be vulnerable with your spouse, so that you may experience the greatest joys that are only on the other side of vulnerability. The exercises this week are sure to help if you do them. Remember to report to your accountability partner. Best wishes!

Be a Marriage Maker not breaker!

*Andy and Jennifer Smith*

### **Vulnerability in Your Marriage Discovery**

Here are some possible areas in a marriage where we might be most vulnerable.

- Communication – We want to be heard, understood and validated.
- Money – “You spend way too much!” “You don’t provide enough!” Or how about this one – “My wife makes more than me!” Or “Your business venture is causing us to lose money!”
- Intimacy & Sex – There may be feelings of being unwanted, rejected or taken advantage of especially if there is any past abuse or trauma related to intimacy
- Household Chores – Are they divided fairly? Are they done the “right” way – you know like the threat of some husbands in the kitchen or some women trying to be the “handy man”? I’m NOT saying husbands and wives aren’t capable of either of these things just that sometimes we like things done OUR way!
- Child Discipline – We may have differing opinions on how it is to be done or default to our parents’ examples of discipline
- Religious Views – Even if we are of the same faith, we may have different ideas of the way we should live our religious beliefs

Are there other examples or areas where you feel vulnerable in your marriage? Write them here or in your journal with as much detail as possible. What do you feel vulnerable about? How long have you felt this way? What solutions have you tried? How has this impacted your marriage relationship? Are you hopeful this can improve?







## **Recognizing Shame**

Here are some causes of shame that Brené Brown found in her studies.

Women can feel shame when rejected, when they feel they cannot do it all. They work hard to show the world what they want to be and shame happens when the mask is pulled off. Shame is no seat at the lunch table with the popular girls. Shame is when people see we are not holding it all together. Women try to do it all, keep a smile, and make sure no one sees how hard it really is or what a struggle it really is. If women get caught in the struggle, they can feel shame.

In her studies, Brown found that women ask men to be vulnerable and then are upset when men showed vulnerability because now they are not the tough protector or the knight in shining armor they SHOULD be. "Should" is that fitting in, impressing and expectation word!

I recently heard a young newly married man say during a talk in church that he wasn't too nervous about speaking in the family ward because now that he is married, he doesn't have to impress the girls. He obviously was not feeling as vulnerable as he did before getting married. I guess that's one of those perks about being married!

Men have reported that shame is failure at work, on the football field, in marriage, in bed, with money, etc. Shame comes when they feel a sense of being defective and being seen as soft and not tough. Showing fear is shameful. Men may feel they can't show fear or even feel afraid.

An overzealous coach told a football player not to be a "Pussy". He took his fear, turned it into shame and plowed over everyone in his way, including his wife and family later on. He had to re-learn it was OK to be afraid, and he became a counselor to help other men deal with similar challenges.

Being criticized or ridiculed is extremely shaming for males. A great example of this is when a guy is shoved up against the lockers in high school. "I'm not allowed to show fear and be afraid if I want to belong. This is who I HAVE to be to belong!" Love and belonging are irreversible needs in our DNA, to be part of something bigger than us and sometimes we change to fit in. But sometimes that is going against our authentic selves.

Our culture also tells us to have perfect houses, bodies, jobs, children, etc. We are never enough because someone else is always better. Brown says, "The stories of our struggles are difficult for everyone to own, and if we've worked hard to make sure everything looks 'just right' on the outside, the stakes are high when it comes to truth-telling. This is why shame loves perfectionists- it's so easy to keep quiet."

Perfection doesn't exist, and the pursuit of it is exhausting and moves us away from who we really are.

How do we recognize if we are in shame? Brené Brown talks about some physiological symptoms she experiences when she is in shame. She says, "I know I'm struggling with shame when that warm wash of inadequacy comes over me, my heart races, my face feels hot, my mouth gets dry, my armpits tingle, and time slows down."

Are there other examples or areas where you feel shame in your life? Write them here or in your journal with as much details as possible.

- What triggers shame for you?
- How do you recognize when you are in shame?
- What does it feel like?
- How does this affect your marriage relationship?
- What are your best tools for dealing with shame?

(Tip: Although journaling is a powerful self-discovery and healing tool, if writing is a real struggle for you, try using a voice recorder on your phone or computer to discover where vulnerability and shame shows up in your life.)





## **Disabling Shame**

Disabling shame will allow vulnerability to show up in a healthy way and allow you to feel safe communicating on a deeper level with your spouse! The following four ideas will give you some understanding of how to disable shame.

Brené Brown's decade of research revealed four elements that men and women with high levels of *shame resilience* share:

1. They understand shame and recognize what messages and expectations trigger shame for them.
2. They practice critical-awareness by reality-checking the messages and expectations that tell us that "being imperfect" means being inadequate.
3. They reach out and share their stories with people they trust. (Preferably you have the relationship with your spouse that you can share most everything and have a trusted friend or parent if you need someone else who will listen, not criticize or compare to your stories. Our shame stories are not something to share with just anyone.)
4. They speak shame – they use the word *shame*, they talk about how they're feeling, and they ask for what they need.

Be AWARE and conscious that we are all different in our feelings and life's experiences. What is embarrassing for your spouse may be intensely shaming for you. What brings up guilt for your spouse may not even come up on your radar. Awareness of our spouse's levels of vulnerability is going to be super helpful as we try to support each other in the shame and blame game which is a game we don't want to play!

## **Vulnerability Discussion with Your Spouse**

To have a discussion about vulnerability and shame with your spouse may feel vulnerable! But that is the point here. Don't give up your deepest joys by putting up walls and not risking open honest communication with your spouse.

If you are both taking this course, great! Both of you can choose one thing to share from the exercises this week to open up discussion.

If you are taking this course alone, tell your spouse that your coach has given you an assignment to share some important and sensitive information with them. Ask them to be a good listener and to try not to judge. Let them know you would appreciate their support.

Share ONE thing from the "Vulnerability in Your Marriage Discovery" exercise on pages 7-8. Then share and discuss the four elements under "Disabling Shame" on page 13 to discover ways to disable any shame that shows up in your vulnerability area.

Report here how your spouse discussion went or to your accountability partner. Did it go well or not so good? Did you gain new insight or ideas how to be more comfortable with vulnerability? Can you be open to exploring more discussion on these topics in the future?

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Here are a few words on “perfectionism” that ties into shame and compounds shame’s power.

Facebook Quote:

Hey, you! Yes, you. Stop being unhappy with yourself. You are perfect. Stop wishing you looked like someone else or wishing people liked you as much as they like someone else. Stop trying to get attention from those who hurt you. Stop hating your body, your face, your personality, your quirks. Love them. Without those things you wouldn’t be you. And why would you want to be anyone else? Be confident with who you are. Smile. It’ll draw people in. My happiness will not depend on others anymore. I’m happy because I love who I am. I love my flaws. I love my imperfections. They make me, me. And “Me” is pretty amazing. (TheLawofAttraction.com)

Do you love your imperfections? There are so many imperfections in the sentence structure and capitalizations in this quote when Jennifer saw it on Facebook that it drove her “batty.” (Some of them were fixed here.) But isn't that the point? We hope you’ll excuse any errors and mistakes in this communication course.

Remember to love yourself BECAUSE you are imperfect. Others will receive the amazing goodness and messages that you share and have learned from your imperfections and life’s lessons!