

## CHAPTER 8



# Safe Space for Vulnerability



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**Unlocking**  
*the*  
**MAGIC**  
*of*  
**Facilitation**

Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation:  
11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know  
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# Safe Space for Vulnerability

*"Vulnerability is our most accurate measurement of courage"*

*- Brené Brown*

On one side of the stage, high above the crowd, a trapeze artist chalks his hands, pats them on his legs, then grips the bar. He takes a small breath, shakes off his fear, and steps off of his platform—after a moment's fall, he swings. Swooping toward the ground, then toward the sky, he releases his grip and throws his body into a spin. Suspended in the air, for an instant he's weightless, but gravity soon takes its grip and he begins to plummet.

A few moments earlier, another artist on the other side

of the stage, having chalked her hands and cleared her mind, recentering herself, she inverts on the trapeze; and hanging from her knees high above the stage, she takes her leap. Now, she is swooping in a large precious arc toward the first artist, who is in a free fall toward the stage. She reaches out, locks arms—his life is literally in her hands — and safely swings them back to her platform.

The crowd erupts in applause. Most of the audience are rapt in awe and disbelief—unsure of how either artist was capable of what they did, or everything it took for them to succeed in their feat—but a few spectators are looking up at them, high on their platform, thinking, “I’d like to take that leap.”

The first artist is the embodiment of vulnerability: throwing himself into the air, uncertain of his safety; trusting that this risk won’t result in his undoing, he surrendered himself entirely into the hands of another.

The second artist is the embodiment of courageous compassion: planning to catch before the other needed it; having already made the decision to do everything she could to catch him, no matter how twisted or turned he became in his leap; and inverting herself, shouldering a different kind of risk to ensure the connection.

In this chapter, we discuss the complementary pair of traits that are vulnerability and courageous compassion, two things that combine to foster risks without regrets, leaps without deadly falls.

This complementary pair is necessary get the most out of all the concepts that follow this chapter (the *prestige* of this book), and in order to succeed in this feat, you’ll need to draw on all the lessons you’ve learned in the chapters that came before it (our *pledge*). This is the *turn*. Pay close atten-

tion, or you might miss it.

## [RE-] INTRODUCING VULNERABILITY

Vulnerable is generally thought of as being susceptible to emotional, physical, or psychological harm. Vulnerability, in this understanding of the term, is generally unavoidable (you can never absolutely protect yourself from all harm) and simultaneously something to be avoided at all costs (most people do not seek out harm). Vulnerability gets a bad rap. In the context of this book, we'd like you to meet a different connotation of the word.

In this book, the word **vulnerability means *making oneself susceptible to emotional, physical, or psychological harm***. In this way, vulnerability is as much of an action as it is a mindset. It's a decision. It's a process. And, above all, it's something we see as desirable, healthy, and even necessary for fostering connection and powerful learning.

Our understanding and celebration of vulnerability comes from Dr. Brené Brown, whose research has informed our facilitation work as much as it has our lives in general<sup>1</sup>. It was through her work that we further solidified our beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> Seriously. Nothing lights us up as much as the opportunity to gush about Brené—her work, her attitude, her angle on life. We're going to do our best to not make this chapter into a Brené Brown Fan Blog (which we don't have...yet), so let us instead take a moment to say this: we recommend everything we've ever read or seen from Brené to every facilitator, trainer, educator, and human. At the very least, watch her TED talks, read *Daring Greatly* then *Rising Strong*, then get back to us if you're somehow not convinced. All of her work, in one way or another, informs this chapter (and, truly, this entire book [and – hell, let's be real—everything we do in life ever all the time every day oh gosh this footnote has spun out of control okay we'll stop]).

that vulnerability isn't something to be avoided, but something to be embraced, both for us as facilitators, and also for the participants in our trainings.

### WHAT DOES VULNERABILITY LOOK LIKE?

The analogy that we used at the opening of this chapter demonstrates a physical display of vulnerability, and also a particularly loud one, but vulnerability takes on many forms and volumes. Sometimes it's physical, but for many of us it's more often opening oneself up to emotional or psychological pain. Sometimes vulnerability is subtle, tiny, and almost invisible. What feels vulnerable for one person may not feel vulnerable for another, and there may be no one act, decision, or mindset, that is universally vulnerable. But to paint it with a broad brush, vulnerability looks like risk.

Vulnerability is someone letting their guard down. It's opening the drawbridge to the castle when you feel there is an enemy is at the gates, and asking them kindly not to storm in. Vulnerability is someone stepping outside of their comfort zone. It's playing a game when you're not sure you can win. Vulnerability often feels like displaying weakness when you want to be displaying strength.

In facilitation settings, vulnerability takes a few common forms:

- ★ Saying "I don't know"—as a facilitator, who feels pressured to be seen as an expert; or as a participant, who is afraid to acknowledge they have room to grow.
- ★ Engaging in an activity, discussion, or process without a clear assurance of where it will go—as a facilitator, for whom this is new territory; or as a participant, who has to trust the facilitator to be their guide.

- ★ Sharing a perspective that is personal, meaningful, unpopular, or otherwise scary—as a facilitator, who may lose the group’s trust or respect; or as a participant, who may be mocked, attacked, ignored, or worse.

## WHAT DOES VULNERABILITY FEEL LIKE?

The process of vulnerability is uncomfortable. There’s a phrase we use a lot in conversations about complex social issues (like oppression, or identity) that goes, “If you’re comfortable, you’re not engaged in the conversation.” This is because to fully engage in a controversial conversation is an act of vulnerability, and the discomfort that comes with it is generally palpable. We feel it in the pits of our stomachs, in our quickening heart rates, the sweating of our palms, the anxious tapping of our feet, the clenching of our jaws and tensing of our shoulders.

Sometimes the process of vulnerability brings about a fight or flight response in our minds. We feel threatened, and in turn see options of “threaten back” or “retreat.” Things move quickly—too quickly—and we don’t have time to think them through. Risks get highlighted, magnified to an overwhelming scale, and are sometimes all our mind is able to identify.

And sometimes the process of vulnerability evokes an intense emotional response. From fiery anger to profound sadness, the range is wide and the experience is often one that feels decidedly irrational. Part of us knows *I shouldn’t be feeling this* (e.g., “Why am I crying? All I did was tell the group how grateful I am to be here...”) while another part of us knows *I should absolutely be feeling this* (“Of course I’m crying. I just told the group how grateful I am to be here!”).

We’re using this phrase “the process of vulnerability” be-

cause all of the above might happen at any point in a series of moments: when you're considering a vulnerable action, when you're acting vulnerably, or after you've acted.

### WHY IS VULNERABILITY IMPORTANT FOR FACILITATION?

After reading the above section, you might be remembering back to our phrase “celebration of vulnerability” and thinking, “Please don’t invite me to a Meg and Sam party.” Yeah, yeah, we know. Sweaty palms isn’t an easy sell, and if we somehow didn’t hook you with the allure of irrational sobbing, then give us one more shot.

Let’s revisit what we highlighted as common forms of vulnerability that present themselves during facilitation, and see if we can get you all aboard the S. S. Expose Yourself .

**Vulnerability is saying “I don’t know.”** We don’t know about you, but for us it’s hard to imagine learning happening in a setting where people are unable to confess a lack of learning. Further, when we do a side-by-side comparison of “sweaty palms” and “giving inaccurate information that may damage someone’s career or cause serious and irreversible harm because of winging an answer someone felt unable to not answer” we see an obvious, sweaty winner.

**Vulnerability is engaging in an activity, discussion, or process without a clear assurance of where it will go.**

If you recall back to previous chapters, you’ll remember that facilitation (compared to teaching or lecturing) requires us to let go of individual control. We might end up sobbing uncontrollably, or we might end up asking the perfect question that opens a floodgate of learning, and

sometimes we'll do both of those things at the same time.

**Vulnerability is sharing a perspective that is personal, meaningful, unpopular, or otherwise scary.** Not to belabor the point, but, again, this almost is the goal of facilitation. None of us can be truly neutral, so anything we add to a space is going to push or pull, and we can't know how intensely others will feel that push, or how much it will pull out of us.

## MEET COURAGEOUS COMPASSION

The two words are familiar. One means not being deterred by fear, danger, or pain, and the other means sympathy, empathy, or concern for the suffering of others. And like how we're using "vulnerability" in this book, our use of "courageous compassion" is based on common understandings, but with a twist.

In this book, the phrase **courageous compassion means choosing to overcome the fear, anticipated danger, or pain of empathizing with another's suffering.** In this way, courageous compassion, like vulnerability, is as much of an action as it is a mindset. Courageous compassion is embodied in moments, and it's carried with in us between them.

Courageous compassion is rooted in empathy, and assumes that—when we choose to—we are capable of great feats of empathy, something Sam Richards calls *radical empathy*<sup>2</sup>. At its most extreme, courageous compassion might be thought of as loving one's enemies, but we'd never generally

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<sup>2</sup> Check out Sam Richards' TED Talk "A radical experiment in empathy" for more perspective on this.

recommend you think of participants as enemies. (Though it's okay to think of some participants are enemies. You know the ones. And they know who they are. Jerks—but we love those jerks.)

### WHAT DOES COURAGEOUS COMPASSION LOOK LIKE?

In the trapeze analogy, courageous compassion was the second person who was swinging in to catch the first. While this is a helpful mental image, it's missing one piece in particular that we now think you're ready to know: what was happening in that trapeze artist's mind.

In the story, we said “having chalked her hands and cleared her mind, recentering herself, she inverts on the trapeze.” What we didn't tell you was that earlier, backstage before the show, the first artist was a complete asshole to the second. And in her mind, as she was climbing the ladder to her platform, was the repeated thought of “How easy would it be for me to just *not* catch him?”

But that's not who she is. She's here to catch him, no matter how much of a jerk he is, and recentering her mind on his well-being, and inverting herself (literally turning herself upside-down for his benefit), is what's needed to ensure she has both hands free to catch him. And that, our friends, is courageous compassion. It's not just what happens (the catch, the saving of someone who is falling), it's the mental gymnastics that had to happen before the catch.

Now, what does courageous compassion look like in facilitation? In an interview we hosted with Erik Tyler<sup>3</sup>, a facili-

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<sup>3</sup> If you'd like to watch the interview, it was part of our FacilitatingXYZ LIVE Series, and can be found at this link: <http://bit.ly/UTMei>

tator and life coach, he told us that people tend to open up to him in ways they don't open up to others. We asked him why, and the conversation turned to him sharing with us that he chooses to love someone before he meets them. Further, he said that in facilitation, "it's fun for [him] to actually have the person that's least likeable feel like someone loved them by the end of it."

That is what one form courageous compassion takes in facilitation. Here are a few more:

- ★ Finding common ground with someone who has said something that makes you feel like you're diametrically opposed, often by asking "Why?" (e.g., "Why do you believe that?" or "Why did you think that was the right thing to say?") with genuine curiosity, instead of as a thinly veiled value statement.
- ★ Being patient with a participant, or a group, when they are being obstructive or impatient themselves.
- ★ Exploring a concept you've explored a thousand times before with the excitement of someone who is seeing it for the first time.

### WHAT DOES COURAGEOUS COMPASSION FEEL LIKE?

Courageous compassion feels like internal liberation. That's probably not what you were expecting us to say, after all the sweating and sobbing we talked about above. And we understand why you may be in doubt, and we want you to know that we often experience that same doubt. The doubt, actually, is one of the things that inhibits us from acting with courageous compassion.

But the doubt isn't courageous compassion any more

than a frozen bum is snowboarding. The doubt pops up when your courageous compassion recedes. It happens when you get out of that mindset, or before and after a moment of courageous compassion. The more time you spend in doubt, the colder your bum gets, because it means less time you're actually snowboarding. And it's not just doubt. It's fear, it's judgment, it's resentment. It's a lot of things. But none of them are what courageous compassion feels like, because you can only experience that feeling when you've overcome the others.

And when you do access courageous compassion, it feels like freedom, because you're releasing yourself from all those internal chains. It feels like disinhibited connection. It feels like trust, access, and sometimes joy. And then, after you've made the connection with the other person—and felt the freedom from everything that was preventing you from doing so—courageous compassion feels as close as you can imagine to whatever the other person is feeling.

If the other person is feeling afraid, courageous compassion feels like fear. If the other person is feeling shame, you feel that shame. You may feel another person's rage, remorse, or rejection. And in the same way that vulnerability often leads you to experience emotions that you can't rationalize, you may find yourself, in moments of courageous compassion, questioning the emotions you're feeling ("Why am I feeling this sadness?"). This question may pull you out of the feeling, or sometimes a twist of it will be an anchor to find your way back in ("Why are *they* feeling this sadness?").

Fear, shame, rage, and remorse are all challenging feelings to feel, especially if you're feeling them alone. Through reaching out with courageous compassion, no one person is alone in feeling those things. You and the other person are

sharing the burden of those taxing emotions—along with the sweaty palms and spontaneous sobs that may come with them. So while they're challenging emotions, they're made a little easier to navigate when you're navigating them together.

### WHY IS COURAGEOUS COMPASSION IMPORTANT FOR FACILITATION?

If you're asking others to leap, as a facilitator it's your responsibility to catch them—no matter how twisted or turned they get in the air, or how terrible of a person they may seem to be or were backstage. It may take inverting yourself, and it will always take you deciding to be swooping toward them before they need it. The only way that you can safely make learning happen from vulnerability is if you meet it with courageous compassion. And even then there's risk. You may lose your grip, or mistime your swing, despite your every intent to catch that person. And that's where the following chapters come in: we can think of them as the safety net. The first safety net is learning to navigate triggers, and it may be the most important of them all.



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