



## **Mental Health Matters: Valuing vulnerability**

### **How comfortable are you with your vulnerability?**

Silly question – right?

Surely 'vulnerability' = discomfort ... well, yes and no.

In general it has a bad press, most would consider it's not good to be vulnerable, it characterises some of our most sensitive and painful moments in life and if persistent, can leave us feeling exposed, disconnected and in danger. But curiously, it may also be a doorway to some of the most tender and important things we really value in life such as trust, closeness and intimacy, even healing. And there is a hopeful possibility of becoming more comfortable with our vulnerability, more accepting and skilled in how we live with our experience ... as a route to health ... but it's tricky. Let's give it a bit of thought ...

### **The metaphor of the peeler crab**

Let's start way back ... Crabs have the misfortune of being regarded as a tasty meal by many of those with whom they share their environment. Consequently they've learned to hide, but their main protection is of course their shell ... they are armour plated. But there's a problem - you can't grow inside a suit of armour and periodically they need to peel it off, which enables them to grow before it hardens again. At this time they are particularly vulnerable and withdrawn ... but it is also the only time the females can mate.



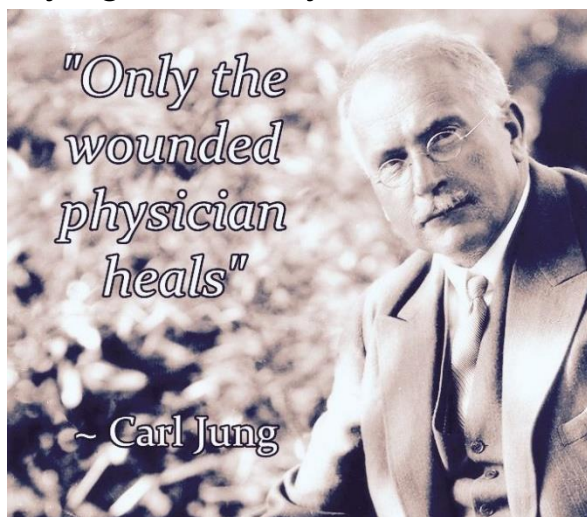
### **So what's that to do with us?**

In some sense we are all vulnerable to the forces around us, some feel this more than others and with varying degrees of

success we learn to cope. Some of these coping mechanisms amount to self-protective armour, we keep threats and intruders at a distance – but it's hard to grow inside a suit of armour and our inflexible self-protective defences can become serious obstacles which prevent us from being open to contact, connection, relationships and intimacy in its many forms. Paradoxically, our self-defensive withdrawal or 'armour' can defend us from opportunities for health, growth and healing.

### **Carl Jung ... on healing**

As one of most famous of psychotherapists Jung is famous for saying that, 'Only the wounded physician heals', which is often



taken as giving emphasis and value to the troubles we go through in life and how they can become a source of understanding and empathy for others. Experience can become expertise, which forms the foundation of peer support. It's an interesting research finding that 4/5 of councillors and

psychotherapists would say that their career choice was based on such 'wounding' experiences. Similarly, a survey of staff working in our local mental health trust found 40% had personal experience of mental health challenges. But it's worth going back to Jung's original words ... because he said more than that and offered an improbable link with our peeler crabs. In context it reads, *'The doctor is effective only when he himself is affected. Only the wounded physician heals. But when the doctor wears his personality like a coat of armour he has no effect.'* Even well qualified practitioners can get trapped by their professional roles and identities and what appears to be ways of coping can in practice be obstacles. The therapeutic relationship, any therapeutic relationship, is principally an invitation to gradually cultivate familiarity, confidence and skill in being vulnerable - safely, with a trusted person, without shame and experience that being accepted supports self-acceptance.

It is therefore part of many healing or therapeutic journeys, whether in formal settings or in day-to-day living to reconsider and value vulnerability, as a path towards being in touch with oneself and others, a path to self-knowledge and knowing more about life and relationships, a path towards finding fulfilment in engaging with the whole of our life experience – including the tricky bits. Certainly not easy, but worth it.

### **The power of vulnerability – Brene Brown**

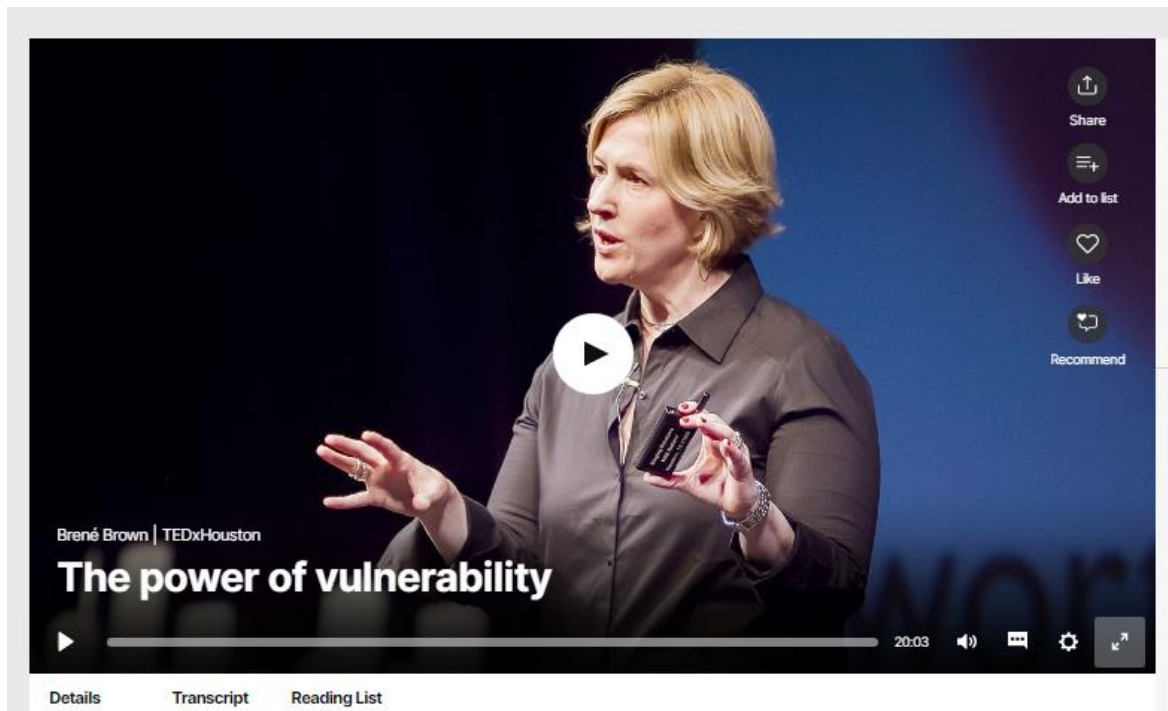
One of the most influential and supportive views on vulnerability comes from a TED talk given by Brene Brown in 2010. Brene is a social worker turned social scientist, a story teller and a warm, funny and approachable human being. It says something about our interests that her talk has been viewed more than 53 million times and is one of the most popular TED talks ever.

Her social science research was based on an understanding that, ‘connection is what gives meaning to our lives – it’s why we are here’. But she describes herself as, initially, someone preoccupied with control and measurement who was somewhat shocked at the findings of her own research. She was surprised to find that people achieve connection, meaning and purpose in their lives *through embracing vulnerability*, which was challenging for her ... and maybe us too? Her summary view was drawn from thousands of observations drawn from people’s life stories that, *‘vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and the struggle for worthiness **but it also appears to be the birthplace of joy and creativity and belonging and love**’*.

Hers is a personal story too, of how she took her own studies to heart as a means of finding ‘the courage to be imperfect’ in support of growing into more wholehearted and authentic living.

So to return to where we came in ... it appears that one important dimension of mental health and wellbeing is how we relate to vulnerability. Which is relevant to us all. If you’d like to think a bit more about valuing vulnerability you really can’t do much better than set aside a comfortable amount of time to

watch Brené Brown's now famous 20mins TED talk and give yourself space to think ... 'what is this saying to me?'



[https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en)

She has other talks and books easily found online but if you wanted to follow up this a bit further, those with Netflix may be interested to take a look at her 2019 update, 'The call to courage'.

We are also interested in thinking if and what we can do about this ... can we learn to notice when we shame ourselves and one another and see if there are safe and positive steps we can take towards being more comfortable with our vulnerability?

Take care, and with all good wishes

Glenn, Kate and Sophie

For BradTog MHM

Ps. Do let us know what you make of this and if you have suggestions or offers to make for future postings