

## NAVIGATING VULNERABILITY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR ENTREPRENEURS

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Working as an entrepreneur is a vulnerable experience. The very nature of starting and leading a venture calls for you to open yourself up to potential pain daily. Whether standing up in front of a room full of investors or sitting down for a challenging conversation with an employee, the risk of being rejected and criticized lurks around every corner. Maybe that is why society views you as heroic; you courageously put your passions, beliefs, and ideas out into the world for all to see. Or do you?

Let's be honest, although your job calls for you to be vulnerable, when was the last time you stepped into that vulnerability? You know what I'm talking about, those situations that expose your weaknesses, doubts, and mishaps; those situations that flood your system with uncertainty and fear because if anyone were ever to find out, they might view you as **not good enough**.

So you avoid situations that make you feel vulnerable because a misstep from the towering pedestal that society placed you on can only mean one thing: a long, tumbling fall from grace. But what if I told you that instead of falling from grace, you could leap to freedom? What if the same vulnerability that you so desperately seek to avoid is the same vulnerability that will open the doors to a new way of being, one where you feel aligned, creative, connected to others, and a sense of improved wellbeing? It's possible.

My research colleagues and I spent the last two years working with 46 entrepreneurs and studying vulnerability to understand what causes it, how to navigate it, and how it can help (and hurt) your wellbeing. Here is what we found.

### **Why do you feel vulnerable?**

First, we believe awareness is the key to change, so we dug down to the root and unearthed the sources or the primary triggers that lead to feeling vulnerable. We found three triggers:

1. *Feeling judged* by others but also by yourself in the form of self-criticism.

2. Fearing *loss* concerning venture and financial stability as well as time with loved ones.
3. Facing *conflict* between what you want and what others want.

These triggers come loaded with negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, disappointment, guilt, and shame.

### **How do you navigate vulnerability?**

Next, let's explore the two stages you'll likely experience when responding to vulnerability: concealing and revealing.

*Concealing.* To protect yourself from the discomfort of vulnerability, you conceal or hide behind three metaphorical masks:

1. *The pleasing mask* is when you conform to others' expectations because maximizing the number of people you satisfy will minimize the chance of disappointing anyone.
2. *The performing mask* involves staying busy because the more you hustle at work, the better chance you have at outrunning the negative feelings.
3. *The physically or psychologically detaching mask* adopts the "out of sight, out of mind" concept where removing yourself from a vulnerable situation removes the potential for more pain.

Masking vulnerability offers a sense of safety from the negative feelings of vulnerability, but it also suffocates your wellbeing. Simply put, when you hide behind a mask, there will be a lot less exposure to threatening situations but also a lot less exposure to growth opportunities.

Over time, deteriorating wellbeing will encourage you to disengage or even exit entrepreneurship. However, it can also trigger a transition from concealing to revealing.

*Revealing.* Revealing is a willingness to remove your mask and face the discomfort of vulnerability. Revealing can take many forms; however, it usually involves stepping outside your comfort zone. For example, this may include sharing struggles, seeking help, and admitting mistakes. It is a terrifying experience that requires a herculean effort. However, we found that self-reflection, tapping into purpose, and taking small steps can act as strength boosters to help you to remove your mask.

## **How can vulnerability help your wellbeing?**

Removing your mask will support your wellbeing in three ways. First, by facing your vulnerability, you will free yourself from the weight of the mask. Second, by accepting criticism and rejection, you will develop greater competence because you will have more opportunities to learn and innovate. Finally, by sharing with others, you will realize that you are not alone. So while feeling vulnerable is scary, it can also support your wellbeing.

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