

Embracing Vulnerability

A powerful way to connect with others

When we think of our vulnerability often our immediate impulse is to minimise it. For families of a person with disability, this urge can be amplified. This might be a natural response and the impetus to create safeguards that minimise the possibility of bad things happening to their loved one.

But what if this urge to protect is actually inhibiting the growth of one the most effective and enduring safeguards known: relationships?

Connection with others is part of why we're here. To love, to be loved in return and to belong. But the risk can be heartbreak, let-down and rejection. So relationship and belonging keep us safe but they are also a key experience of vulnerability. Many people decide that this is too big a risk.

This is a missed opportunity. It is comfortable to think that devaluation is something that the 'system' and others create. It means that those others are the ones who need to change. But with the shift towards self-direction, families more than ever are highly involved in decision-making and therefore the immediacy of those

decisions are felt much more keenly and directly.

Families are reclaiming their natural authority, but with this comes the opportunity and necessity for self reflection. The family is part of the 'system' so the question needs to be asked: what am I doing to bring about positive change? How are my actions and my beliefs impacting on my family member's life? Because families might be acting on behalf of their family member, it is always healthy to ask questions and to reflect.

Wounding Experiences

Sadly, it is quite common for people to have experienced feelings of being hurt, let down and rejected by people who were trusted or that the service system trusted. And it is only human to find it hard to bounce back from the breaking of trust, from experiences of rejection: to move on and treat the next experience as totally new, without the 'baggage' of the past.

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No-one can be blamed or judgement made about any of these very human reactions and experiences.

But we need to be conscious of this baggage if we are to build a sustainable, self-directed system of support that engages with all [5 elements](#) that we believe fosters long-term success.

As families, have we created safeguards that come from a wounded place, a place that often finds it hard to trust, a place of feeling let down and hurt by others? If this is the case, we might be inadvertently adding to vulnerability.

Vulnerability as a human experience

What if we tried to see vulnerability a bit differently? What happens if we view it as a human experience? In order for connection to happen we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. The risks when we reach out include being misunderstood, being rejected, feeling out of control, feeling exposed and fearing being seen as needy. In short, it entails a whole lot of uncertainty.

Family members often take on these fears on behalf of their son/daughter with disability. We become afraid to take a risk on another's behalf.



All the previous wounding experiences pile up and this history makes it hard to take any more risks. In subtle and often undetected ways, families themselves can become part of the wounding structures because they perceive too much risk in reaching out.

But this kind of vulnerability is also the birthplace of joy, creativity, love and tenderness.

American academic, author, and public speaker Brene Brown (www.brenebrown.com) has researched the areas of courage, vulnerability, shame and worthiness for the last 10 years.

Her research reveals consistently that the one thing that keeps us out of connection with others is fear of not being worthy of it. People who felt they were worthy, fully embraced vulnerability. To them it wasn't pretty but it was necessary.

What her research also revealed is that the only difference between people who have a strong sense of belonging and worthiness and people who wonder if they are good enough is that they believe they are worthy of love and belonging.

She says that these people weren't always caught up in who they 'should be' but rather they celebrated who they were. They have the courage to be imperfect and the compassion to be kind to themselves.

This does not mean that we should forget about safeguarding but rather we should be regularly reflecting on the safeguards we have in place and the personal histories that inform many of them. We may not even be conscious of some of them.

Embracing vulnerability, when it comes to building relationships and connections, is actually very empowering.

Yes, it takes courage. But how much more wonderful it is to harness it as a means for personal growth rather than erecting barriers to the risks vulnerability exposes us to.

It is a fundamental and authentic human experience that no one, including people with disability, should be shielded from.

Believe in their worthiness, and yours.

Would you like to learn more?

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