



Vulnerability VS neediness

Whether due to cultural conditioning or the throwaway insults of a former partner, for a lot of women, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable can feel an awful lot like neediness. But how closely related are these states of being?

by **JADE TAYLOR COOKE**

Let's be honest: being vulnerable sounds more than a little frightening. It feels as though there's an implied threat: vulnerable ... to attack. 'However, "vulnerability" has taken on its own nuances within the realm of relationship psychology,' explains psychologist Dr Stephanie Sieberhagen. 'Being vulnerable does not mean being weak or fragile. Rather, it's the act of maturely opening up, showing up and making yourself available for connection.'

And connection is what we're all here for. 'It's the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued,' writes shame and empathy researcher Brené Brown in her bestselling book *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Sure, money, tacos and international travel are great, but most people would agree that a life lived without real connection is no life at all. That makes the ability to be open to connection – and to be vulnerable – one of the most important tools we have if we want to experience the human condition.



'Vulnerability Is The Birthplace Of Innovation, Creativity And Change'

Vulnerability isn't important in romantic relationships alone. You can practise being vulnerable with your parents, siblings, children, friends and even in your career. There's a pervasive idea that we need to be emotionless automatons in the workplace. But, as Brené Brown said in her second viral TED Talk, 'Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change' - three things that good businesses thrive on, and fail without.

NEEDS AND NEEDINESS

Let's make one thing perfectly clear: Having needs is not the same thing as being needy. Society champions self-sufficiency, but even the most independent among us has emotional needs for which we must rely on others – things such as a sense of community, love, mutual respect and intimacy. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with communicating these needs to others.

Neediness, on the other hand, 'is a dependence on others for our emotional well-being, and a fear of being rejected or abandoned,' counselling psychologist Rakhi Beekrum says. 'Vulnerability is a strength. It shows one's humanness and can increase emotional closeness, while neediness can push others away and be emotionally draining.'

'Neediness is when the self doesn't feel as though it is enough on its own,' continues Dr Sieberhagen. 'It is often due to childhood wounds that have not been resolved. You feel lonely when you are on your own; not enough without an other; and you crave another person in order to feel whole.'

We can sense neediness in others, and it often repels, rather than engendering, connection. Sometimes, though, it can be a double-edged sword of attraction. 'If a romantic partner has not addressed their own issues, they may find your own neediness appealing,' Dr Sieberhagen says. 'They may even use it as a strategy to manipulate. Neither of these situations is healthy. As a mature adult entering into a romantic relationship, the ideal is that you want someone – but do not feel you need someone – by your side.'

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DON'T ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE VULNERABLE?

'Vulnerability is a significant part of authenticity,' says Rakhi. 'If we are never vulnerable, we are not being true to ourselves. Being afraid to show vulnerability can negatively impact the emotional intimacy of your relationships. It means we cannot ever be truly seen by our partners.' Dr Sieberhagen describes it as being a 'fake or phantom partner', and says it can lead to psychological stress. 'You may suffer from anxiety, as it is not natural to always hold back. It costs you, mentally, even if you have

HOW TO PRACTISE BEING VULNERABLE

❖ WORK ON TRUST.

'Vulnerability is easier in a relationship in which one feels secure,' explains Rakhi, 'so it's important to build trust.' This is often a tandem process: being vulnerable and treating each other with empathy builds trust, and the more you trust, the easier it is to express your vulnerability. 'Start by discussing things you have processed or made peace with, for example past relationships. Share your fears, about your relationship, your career and so on.'

❖ BE HONEST ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS.

'For example, don't say something is okay if it's not. Tell your partner when you feel disrespected, or hurt.'

❖ TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED,

whether that's more quality time together or for the other person to initiate sex more often. 'Needy people often avoid asking, due to the fear of rejection,' says Rakhi.

❖ WORK ON YOURSELF, TOO.

'You'll soon recognise that in order to be vulnerable, we must first have insight into ourselves. We cannot share what we don't understand,' says Rakhi.

suppressed this mechanism into your unconscious mind and are not aware of how much energy it is taking from you.' She says a few signs that could point to this are depression, heightened anxiety or even aggression and anger.

WHEN ARE YOU BEING VULNERABLE AND WHEN ARE YOU BEING NEEDY?

'True vulnerability is being courageous enough to make your want or need known, understanding that the person you're sharing with might choose not to meet your need because it comes into conflict with their own – and that's okay,' writes Lissa Rankin, the author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Mind Over Medicine*. 'Are you able to sit with the excruciating vulnerability of having your need out there, exposed and raw, knowing that the person you've made yourself vulnerable to has every right not to meet it?'

How you feel about the other person not being willing or able to meet that need is a key differentiator in neediness versus vulnerability. 'The healthy path is

to acknowledge how you feel about your partner not meeting the need,' advises Rakhi. 'It's normal to feel sad or rejected. Allow yourself to feel the uncomfortable feelings. Recognise that as much as you have a right to ask for what you'd like, they also have a right to meet the need or not.'

Once you have processed those uncomfortable feelings, assess how you feel about what has transpired. 'Where needy people feel stuck is that they want to change the other,' says Rakhi. 'They struggle to accept when their partner won't meet their needs and focus on what they cannot control.'

'In contrast, a vulnerable person will feel the disappointment and then focus on what they can control – recognising that the relationship cannot work if the important need is not met, or adjusting their needs. Adjusting a need means truly making peace with the other person not fulfilling it – not quietly resenting them or hoping that they will change. It requires accepting what we cannot change and making decisions that are best for our well-being.'

CAN'T BE VULNERABLE?

It's one thing to know that vulnerability is your best shot at having the kind of relationships you deserve. It's a whole different thing trying to stop yourself adding extra bricks to those inner walls. 'If you are struggling to show healthy vulnerability, it means that you are well defended,' says Dr Sieberhagen. 'In other words, you built defence mechanisms in the past. That would happen as a result of fear due to a perceived (or real) threat.'

As adults, it is expected that we are on a path of self-development. One of the big challenges on this life-long journey of learning is to find our defence mechanisms, confront and understand them, and dismantle them – replacing them with healthy behaviours such as openness and authenticity.'

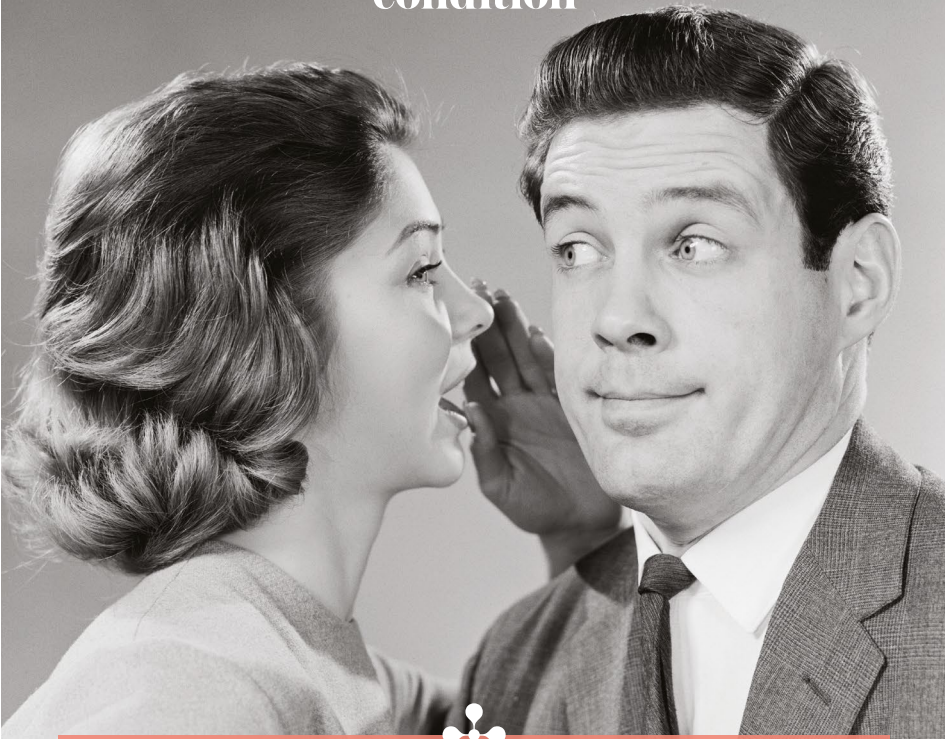
A few reasons you may struggle to feel vulnerable:

- ❖ You feel unworthy of love.
- ❖ You've expressed healthy vulnerability in the past and been dismissed as needy by an immature partner.
- ❖ You confuse vulnerability with sacrificing your independence.
- ❖ You are currently in an unhealthy relationship in which being vulnerable is used against you or makes you unsafe.

BUT ONE OF US IS NEEDY...

Your relationship is not doomed! In fact, you have a golden ticket to take it to the next level by learning even more about each other. 'I recommend all couples accept that relationships take work, but to change the narrative from "work" to "learning",' says Dr Sieberhagen. 'Access resources that challenge your beliefs and communication methods. Hopefully you will learn to have (in the words of Alain de Botton) "charity and generosity of interpretation". That means being open to re-adjusting your held beliefs about the other person, accepting that they are probably not true and looking for more positive perspectives of each other.' You could, for example, discover that your partner's 'neediness' is really a fear of aloneness or loss. 'Exploring where this is rooted is far more helpful. There are many reasons why behaviour might be interpreted as neediness, and many more why a person may really be needy, but these are all traits, not true states – they are not fixed and can be shifted.'

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LOST IN TRANSLATION

ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH GARY CHAPMAN'S THEORY OF 'THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES'?

The idea is that the giving and receiving of love can be categorised into five 'languages':

- ❖ Quality time
- ❖ Words of affirmation
- ❖ Physical touch
- ❖ Acts of service
- ❖ Receiving gifts

We can each experience love through any of these five channels, but the theory is that each of us has a proclivity and sensitivity to one in particular. The downside of this is that we are susceptible to being more easily hurt in our particular language. Let's say you speak Quality Time, but your partner speaks Acts Of Service. He's always filling up your car for you, picking up your favourite treats when you're stressed, and throwing you surprise birthday brunches. But because he's also often on his phone when you're together, you feel like he's not present and are hurt by this. Meanwhile, he may feel like no matter what he does, you are impossible to please and he can't meet your needs. You are lost in translation. It's time to get out the metaphorical phrase book and start teaching one another your love languages.

PHOTOS: GALLO/GETTYIMAGES

