Cultivating a Resilient Spirit
Letting Go of Numbing and Powerlessness

Brené Brown, Ph.D., L.M.S.W.

PREVIEW

Brené Brown has been studying shame and vulnerability for many years. She has had three books on the New York Times bestseller list, has presented at several TED talks, and is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. In this excerpt from her book The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are, Dr. Brown explains what resilience is and why it is important to living a wholehearted life.

Resilience—the ability to overcome adversity—has been a growing topic of study since the early 1970s. In a world plagued by stress and struggle, everyone from psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to clergy and criminal justice researchers want to know why and how some folks are better at bouncing back from hardship than others. We want to understand why some people can cope with stress and trauma in a way that allows them to move forward in their lives, and why other people appear more affected and stuck.

As I collected and analyzed my data, I recognized that many of the people I interviewed were describing stories of resilience. I heard stories about people cultivating Wholehearted lives despite adversity. I learned about people’s capacities to stay mindful and authentic under great stress and anxiety, and I heard people describe how they were able to transform trauma into Wholehearted thriving.

It wasn’t difficult to recognize these stories as tales of resilience because I was in graduate school during the heyday of resilience research. I knew these narratives were threaded with what we call protective factors—the things we do, have, and practice that give us the bounce.

What Makes Up Resilience?
If you look at the current research, here are five of the most common factors of resilient people:

1. They are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills.
2. They are more likely to seek help.
3. They hold the belief that they can do something that will help them to manage their feelings and to cope.
4. They have social support available to them.
5. They are connected with others, such as family or friends.1

Of course, there are more factors, depending on the researchers, but these are the big ones.

At first, I hoped the patterns that I observed in my research would lead to a very straightforward conclusion—resilience is a core component of Wholeheartedness—just like the other guideposts. But there was something more to what I was hearing. The stories had more in common than just resilience; all of these stories were about spirit.

According to the people I interviewed, the very foundation of the “protective factors”—the things that made them bouncy—was their spirituality. By spirituality, I’m not talking about religion or theology, but I am talking about a shared and deeply held belief. Based on the interviews, here’s how I define spirituality:

*Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.*

Without exception, spirituality—the belief in connection, a power greater than self, and interconnections grounded in love and compassion—emerged as a component of resilience. Most people spoke of God, but not everyone. Some were occasional churchgoers; others were not. Some worshipped at fishing holes; others in temples, mosques, or at home. Some struggled with the idea of religion; others were devout members of organized religions. The one thing that they all had in common was spirituality as the foundation of their resilience.

From this foundation of spirituality, three other significant patterns emerged as being essential to resilience:

1. Cultivating hope
2. Practicing critical awareness
3. Letting go of numbing and taking the edge off vulnerability, discomfort, and pain

Let’s take a look at each of these and how they’re connected to resilience and spirit.

**Hope and Powerlessness**

As a researcher, I can’t think of two words that are more misunderstood than the words hope and power. As soon as I realized that hope is an important piece of Wholehearted living, I started investigating and found the work of C. R. Snyder, a former researcher at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.² Like most people, I always thought of hope as an emotion—like a warm feeling of optimism and possibility. I was wrong.

I was shocked to discover that hope is not an emotion; it’s a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of what Snyder calls a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency.³ In very simple terms, hope happens when

- We have the ability to set realistic goals (*I know where I want to go*).
- We are able to figure out how to achieve those goals, including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative routes (*I know how to get there, I’m persistent, and I can tolerate disappointment and try again*).
- We believe in ourselves (*I can do this!*).

So, hope is a combination of setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and believing in our own abilities.
And, if that’s not news enough, here’s something else: Hope is learned! Snyder suggests that we learn hopeful, goal-directed thinking in the context of other people. Children most often learn hope from their parents. Snyder says that to learn hopefulness, children need relationships that are characterized by boundaries, consistency, and support. I think it’s so empowering to know that I have the ability to teach my children how to hope. It’s not a crapshoot. It’s a conscious choice.

To add to Snyder’s work on hope, I found in my research that men and women who self-report as hopeful put considerable value on persistence and hard work. The new cultural belief that everything should be fun, fast, and easy is inconsistent with hopeful thinking. It also sets us up for hopelessness. When we experience something that is difficult and requires significant time and effort, we are quick to think, This is supposed to be easy; it’s not worth the effort, or, This should be easier: It’s only hard and slow because I’m not good at it. Hopeful self-talk sounds more like, This is tough, but I can do it.

On the other hand, for those of us who have the tendency to believe that everything worthwhile should involve pain and suffering (like yours truly), I’ve also learned that never fun, fast, and easy is as detrimental to hope as always fun, fast, and easy. Given my abilities to chase down a goal and bulldog it until it surrenders from pure exhaustion, I resented learning this. Before this research I believed that unless blood, sweat, and tears were involved, it must not be that important. I was wrong. Again.

We develop a hopeful mind-set when we understand that some worthy endeavors will be difficult and time consuming and not enjoyable at all. Hope also requires us to understand that just because the process of reaching a goal happens to be fun, fast, and easy doesn’t mean that it has less value than a difficult goal. If we want to cultivate hopefulness, we have to be willing to be flexible and demonstrate perseverance. Not every goal will look and feel the same. Tolerance for disappointment, determination, and a belief in self are the heart of hope.

As a college professor and researcher, I spend a significant amount of time with teachers and school administrators. Over the past two years I’ve become increasingly concerned that we’re raising children who have little tolerance for disappointment and have a strong sense of entitlement, which is very different than agency. Entitlement is “I deserve this just because I want it” and agency is “I know I can do this.” The combination of fear of disappointment, entitlement, and performance pressure is a recipe for hopelessness and self-doubt.

Hopelessness is dangerous because it leads to feelings of powerlessness. Like the word hope, we often think of power as negative. It’s not. The best definition of power comes from Martin Luther King Jr. He described power as the ability to effect change. If we question our need for power, think about this: How do you feel when you believe that you are powerless to change something in your life?

Powerlessness is dangerous. For most of us, the inability to effect change is a desperate feeling. We need resilience and hope and a spirit that can carry us through the doubt and fear. We need to believe that we can effect change if we want to live and love with our whole hearts.

**Practicing Critical Awareness**

Practicing critical awareness is about reality-checking the messages and expectations that drive the “never good enough” gremlins. From the time we wake up to the time our head hits the pillow at night,
we are bombarded with messages and expectations about every aspect of our lives. From magazine ads and TV commercials to movies and music, we’re told exactly what we should look like, how much we should weigh, how often we should have sex, how we should parent, how we should decorate our houses, and which car we should drive. It’s absolutely overwhelming, and, in my opinion, no one is immune. Trying to avoid media messages is like holding your breath to avoid air pollution—it’s not going to happen.

It’s in our biology to trust what we see with our eyes. This makes living in a carefully edited, overproduced, and Photoshopped world very dangerous. If we want to cultivate a resilient spirit and stop falling prey to comparing our ordinary lives with manufactured images, we need to know how to reality-check what we see. We need to be able to ask and answer these questions:

1. Is what I’m seeing real? Do these images convey real life or fantasy?
2. Do these images reflect healthy, Wholehearted living, or do they turn my life, my body, my family, and my relationships into objects and commodities?
3. Who benefits by my seeing these images and feeling bad about myself? Hint: This is ALWAYS about money and/or control.

In addition to being essential to resilience, practicing critical awareness is actually one of the four elements of shame resilience. Shame works like the zoom lens on a camera. When we are feeling shame, the camera is zoomed in tight and all we see is our flawed selves, alone and struggling. We think to ourselves, “I’m the only one with a muffin-top? Am I the only one with a family who is messy, loud, and out of control? Am I the only one not having sex 4.3 times per week (with a Calvin Klein model)? Something is wrong with me. I am alone.

When we zoom out, we start to see a completely different picture. We see many people in the same struggle. Rather than thinking, “I’m the only one,” we start thinking, “I can’t believe it! You too? I’m normal! I thought it was just me!” Once we start to see the big picture, we are better able to reality-check our shame triggers and the messages and expectations that we’re never good enough.

In my experiences as a teacher and shame researcher, I have found incredible insight and wisdom in the work of Jean Kilbourne and Jackson Katz. Both Kilbourne and Katz explore the relationship of media images to actual problems in the society, such as violence, the sexual abuse of children, pornography and censorship, masculinity and loneliness, teenage pregnancy, addiction, and eating disorders. Kilbourne writes, “Advertising is an over $200 billion a year industry. We are each exposed to over 3000 ads a day. Yet, remarkably, most of us believe we are not influenced by advertising. Ads sell a great deal more than products. They sell values, images, and concepts of success and worth, love and sexuality, popularity and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be. Sometimes they sell addictions.”4 I highly recommend Kilbourne’s and Katz’s DVDs—they’ve changed the way I see the world and myself. (Jean Kilbourne’s latest DVD is Killing Us Softly 4,5 and Katz’s DVD is titled Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity.6)

As I mentioned earlier, practicing spirituality brings perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. When we allow ourselves to become culturally conditioned to believe that we are not enough and that

we don’t make enough or have enough, it damages our soul. This is why I think practicing critical awareness and reality-checking is as much about spirituality as it is about critical thinking.

Numbing and Taking the Edge Off

I talked to many research participants who were struggling with worthiness. When we talked about how they dealt with difficult emotions (such as shame, grief, fear, despair, disappointment, and sadness), I heard over and over about the need to numb and take the edge off of feelings that cause vulnerability, discomfort, and pain. Participants described engaging in behaviors that numbed their feelings or helped them to avoid experiencing pain. Some of these participants were fully aware that their behaviors had a numbing effect, while others did not seem to make that connection. When I interviewed the participants whom I’d describe as living a Wholehearted life about the same topic, they consistently talked about trying to feel the feelings, staying mindful about numbing behaviors, and trying to lean into the discomfort of hard emotions.

I knew this was a critically important finding in my research, so I spent several hundred interviews trying to better understand the consequences of numbing and how taking the edge off behaviors is related to addiction. Here’s what I learned:

1. Most of us engage in behaviors (consciously or not) that help us to numb and take the edge off vulnerability, pain, and discomfort.
2. Addiction can be described as chronically and compulsively numbing and taking the edge off of feelings.
3. We cannot selectively numb emotions. When we numb the painful emotions, we also numb the positive emotions.

The most powerful emotions that we experience have very sharp points, like the tip of a thorn. When they prick us, they cause discomfort and even pain. Just the anticipation or fear of these feelings can trigger intolerable vulnerability in us. We know it’s coming. For many of us, our first response to vulnerability and pain of these sharp points is not to lean into the discomfort and feel our way through but rather to make it go away. We do that by numbing and taking the edge off the pain with whatever provides the quickest relief. We can anesthetize with a whole bunch of stuff, including alcohol, drugs, food, sex, relationships, money, work, caretaking, gambling, staying busy, affairs, chaos, shopping, planning, perfectionism, constant change, and the Internet.

Before conducting this research I thought that numbing and taking the edge off was just about addiction, but I don’t believe that anymore. Now I believe that everyone numbs and takes the edge off and that addiction is about engaging in these behaviors compulsively and chronically. The men and women in my study whom I would describe as fully engaged in Wholehearted living were not immune to numbing. The primary difference seemed to be that they were aware of the dangers of numbing and had developed the ability to feel their way through high-vulnerability experiences.

I definitely believe that genetics and neurobiology can play a critical role in addiction, but I also believe that there are countless people out there struggling with numbing and taking the edge off because the disease model of addiction doesn’t fit their experiences as closely as a model that takes numbing processes into consideration. Not everyone’s addiction is the same.

When I first started my research, I was very familiar with addiction. If you’ve read I Thought It Was Just Me, or if you follow my blog, you probably know that I’ve been sober for close to fifteen years. I’ve always been very up front about my experiences, but I haven’t written about it in great detail because until I started working through this new research on Wholeheartedness, I didn’t really understand it.

Now I get it.

My confusion stemmed from the fact that I never have felt completely in sync with the recovery community. Abstinence and the Twelve Steps are powerful and profoundly important principles in my life, but not everything about the recovery movement fits for me. For example, millions of people owe their lives to the power that comes from saying, “Hi, I’m (name), and I’m an alcoholic.” That’s never fit for me. Even though I’m grateful for my sobriety, and I’m convinced that it has radically changed my life, saying those words has always felt disempowering and strangely disingenuous for me.

I have often wondered if I felt out of place because I quit so many things at one time. My first sponsor couldn’t figure out what meeting I needed and was perplexed by my “very high bottom” (I quit drinking because I wanted to learn more about true self, and my wild party-girl persona kept getting in the way). She looked at me one night and said, “You have the pupu platter of addictions—a little bit of everything. To be safe, it would be best if you just quit drinking, smoking, comfort eating, and getting in your family’s business.”

I remember looking at her, throwing my fork on the table, and saying, “Well, that’s just awesome. I guess I’ll have some free time on my hands for all of the meetings.” I never found my meeting. I quit drinking and smoking the day after I finished my master’s degree and made my way through enough meetings to work the Steps and get one year of sobriety under my belt.

Now I know why.

I’ve spent most of my life trying to outrun vulnerability and uncertainty. I wasn’t raised with the skills and emotional practice needed to “lean into discomfort,” so over time I basically became a take-the-edge-off-aholic. But they don’t have meetings for that. And after some brief experimenting, I learned that describing your addiction that way in a meeting doesn’t always go over very well with the purists.

For me, it wasn’t just the dance halls, cold beer, and Marlboro Lights of my youth that got out of hand—it was banana bread, chips and queso, e-mail, work, staying busy, incessant worrying, planning, perfectionism, and anything else that could dull those agonizing and anxiety-fueled feelings of vulnerability.

I’ve had a couple of friends respond to my “I’m a take-the-edge-off-aholic” with concern about their own habits: “I drink a couple of glasses of wine every night—is that bad?” “I always shop when I’m stressed or depressed.” “I come out of my skin if I’m not always going and staying busy.”

Again, after years of research, I’m convinced that we all numb and take the edge off. The question is, does our ________ (eating, drinking, spending, gambling, saving the world, incessant gossiping, perfectionism, sixty-hour workweek) get in the way of our authenticity? Does it stop us from being emotionally honest and setting boundaries and feeling like we’re enough? Does it keep us from staying

out of judgment and from feeling connected? Are we using _______ to hide or escape from the reality of our lives?

Understanding my behaviors and feelings through a vulnerability lens rather than strictly through an addiction lens changed my entire life. It also strengthened my commitment to sobriety, abstinence, health, and spirituality. I can definitely say, “Hi. My name is Brené, and today I’d like to deal with vulnerability and uncertainty with an apple fritter, beer and cigarette, and spending seven hours on Facebook.” That feels uncomfortably honest.

When We Numb the Dark, We Numb the Light
In another very unexpected discovery, my research also taught me that there’s no such thing as selective emotional numbing. There is a full spectrum of human emotions and when we numb the dark, we numb the light. While I was “taking the edge off” of the pain and vulnerability, I was also unintentionally dulling my experiences of good feelings, like joy. Looking back, I can’t imagine any research finding that has changed what my daily life looks like more than this. Now I can lean into joy, even when it makes me feel tender and vulnerable. In fact, I expect tender and vulnerable.

Joy is as thorny and sharp as any of the dark emotions. To love someone fiercely, to believe in something with your whole heart, to celebrate a fleeting moment in time, to fully engage in a life that doesn’t come with guarantees—these are risks that involve vulnerability and often pain. When we lose our tolerance for discomfort, we lose joy. In fact, addiction research shows us that an intensely positive experience is as likely to cause relapse as an intensely painful experience.7

We can’t make a list of all of the “bad” emotions and say, “I’m going to numb these” and then make a list of the positive emotions and say, “I’m going to fully engage in these!” You can imagine the vicious cycle this creates: I don’t experience much joy so I have no reservoir to draw from when hard things happen. They feel even more painful, so I numb. I numb so I don’t experience joy. And so on.

More on joy is coming in the next chapter. For now, as the sharp edges have started to come back in my own life, I’m learning that recognizing and leaning into the discomfort of vulnerability teaches us how to live with joy, gratitude, and grace. I’m also learning that the uncomfortable and scary leaning requires both spirit and resilience.

The most difficult thing about what I’m proposing in this chapter is captured by a question that I get a lot (especially from my colleagues in the academic world): Is spirituality a necessary component for resilience? The answer is yes.

Feelings of hopelessness, fear, blame, pain, discomfort, vulnerability, and disconnection sabotage resilience. The only experience that seems broad and fierce enough to combat a list like that is the belief that we’re all in this together and that something greater than us has the capacity to bring love and compassion into our lives.

Again, I didn’t find that any one interpretation of spirituality has the corner on the resilience market. It’s not about denominations or dogma. Practicing spirituality is what brings healing and creates resilience. For me, spirituality is about connecting with God, and I do that most often through nature, community, and music. We all have to define spirituality in a way that inspires us.
Whether we’re overcoming adversity, surviving trauma, or dealing with stress and anxiety, having a sense of purpose, meaning, and perspective in our lives allows us to develop understanding and move forward. Without purpose, meaning, and perspective, it is easy to lose hope, numb our emotions, or become overwhelmed by our circumstances. We feel reduced, less capable, and lost in the face of struggle. The heart of spirituality is connection. When we believe in that inextricable connection, we don’t feel alone.

References


