

RJC Shame and Vulnerability Webinar

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What is Vulnerability?

Why is it a good thing?

What are the barriers in Japanese culture?

How can we help Japanese women be more vulnerable with us?

My favorite author, Brene Brown, a researcher and social worker has stated that her life goal is to start a global conversation about vulnerability and shame. Here is how she defines vulnerability:

“I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. With that definition in mind, let’s think about love. Waking up everyday and loving someone who may or may not love us back, whose safety we cannot ensure, who may stay in our lives or leave without a moment’s notice, who may be loyal until the day they die or betray us tomorrow — that’s vulnerability.”

So in my mind, the difference between openness and vulnerability is risk. When you are open with someone, you share your emotions, feelings, etc. but the risk of rejection or not being accepted is much more present regarding vulnerability.

Until Brown started getting people to talk about vulnerability and shame, the world vulnerability had primarily negative connotations of weakness and exposure. No one really thought it to be a good thing to be vulnerable. Indeed, when I talked about this topic with my sociolinguistic professor from grad school, she told me that the idea of it being good is most likely directly linked to religion, namely Christians. The idea of vulnerability being good is found in the Bible (2 Cor 12:9-12) While this may be true, while Brown is a

Christian, her work has spread all over the secular business world in the U.S. as well, and she is often invited by companies such as Pixar to give seminars in team building. Her TED talks are some of the most watched in history. Clearly, the good points of vulnerability are not just seen by Christians.

Why is vulnerability important? It is through vulnerability that one grows. Brown says that it is not a weakness, but the greatest measure of courage.

Brown is writing from a secular perspective, so what she says has limits. We need to realize our strength is only in God.

Through many years of research, Brown found that those who have a strong sense of love and belonging believe they are worthy of love and belonging. These people are also ones willing to be vulnerable, which Brown says is the birthplace of joy, love, belonging and acceptance.

Vulnerability leads to intimacy in relationships. It is the glue that holds close relationships together. It is probably why there are so many close relationships in America, but less in Japan.

The reason I first got interested in this topic is that I noticed that many of my Japanese friends were incredibly vulnerable with me. They shared their hearts with me even if we hadn't known each other that long. I started to wonder, "Why are they sharing all this with me? What is it about me? What is it about them?" In general, most Japanese women in my experience had not been so open and vulnerable in the past.

I started to think, maybe because I am a foreigner and they feel safe with me. I am not a rival like other Japanese women may be. Or maybe it was because I am an open, vulnerable person myself.

So I set out of a quest to learn how I can encourage Japanese women to be more vulnerable, and to grow closer to others and to Jesus in the process.

Barriers to vulnerability in Japan

1. Shame. Like Minako san talked about, shame is the defining characteristic of Japanese culture and greatly influences Japanese relationships. Brown says that when we are defined by what other people think (i.e. Japanese culture) we lose the courage to be vulnerable. Shame is the fear of disconnection, and connection and belonging is crucial in Japanese society. We are paralyzed by the fear we may be seen. They fear if people know the real them, that connection will be broken. But in reality, it is only through being open and vulnerable that we can form real connection and being truly known.

Brown says that shame only works when it keeps in the false belief that you are alone. Women turn against themselves when they experience shame.

Guilt — “I screwed up.”

Shame — “I’m a screwup.”

2. The Idea that Vulnerability is Weakness. There is no word in Japanese to convey the positive meaning of this concept. It took my friend 27 words to define it. To show your struggles is weakness and therefore shameful. That is why only 10,000 women in Japan, compared to 750,000 in English, are receiving treatment for eating disorders. It is a shameful thing which one hides.

Scriptures About Strength in Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:8-12

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is

made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

I Corinthians 1:25

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”

2 Corinthians 13:4

“For to be sure, he crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you.”

2 Samuel 22:33

“It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.”

1 Chronicles 16:11

“Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.”

2 Corinthians 12:5

“I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.”

Hebrews 11:34

“...whose weakness was turned into strength; who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Talking about Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets.

3. Competition with Other Women and Mothers. Japanese women are constantly in competition with other women from their looks, to the bentos to their houses to their kids. Why would you show your vulnerabilities and weaknesses to those you are in competition with? Perhaps this is why they feel they can talk to me, whom they don't see themselves as competing with.

Called to be like Christ, not to compare ourselves to others

1 Corinthians 1:11

“Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.” We are called to be like Jesus, not compete to be better than others.”

John 13:12-15

Jesus washes disciples feet. We are called to do likewise.

Philippians 2:5

“Your attitude should be like that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

4. Pride. A green headed monster than people all over the world struggle with. Mentioned 49 times in the Bible-never in a positive way.

5. Lack of Deep Friendships. This is connected to both shame and the competition with other moms. Talk about the concept of mamatomo and how these friendships are not obligated to go deep.

6. Fear of Rejection and Judgment. This is a huge barrier to

vulnerability all over the world, not just in Japan.

How can we help Japanese women be vulnerable?

1. Be vulnerable ourselves. Show them that it is okay to be weak, that we all have struggles. Share a little of my story with the eating disorder. I have had an eating disorder for 25 years, and now God is in the process of helping me own my freedom in Him. Sharing this story openly and without shame has helped me to form deeper friendships and perhaps encourage my friends to be more open with me.

2. Show Biblical proofs for being vulnerable (Phil 4:12, 2 Cor 9:9-12)

3. Share the importance of community (Acts 2)

4. Learn the language. This is something I feel very strongly about. My ministry and the depth of my relationships with Japanese woman multiplied after I gained competency in Japanese. Of course God can use you greatly while you are learning the language, but if we really want to learn their heart, their worldview, and what makes them think and act and feel as they do, we have a responsibility to learn the language. This is especially true for those living and ministering in Japan. Those outside Japan can learn the language, too. It will impress them and touch them that you care enough to try to learn Japanese, which many of them think is impossibly difficult for us to learn. Things to remember:

* The language is hard and takes a while to feel comfortable in. Don't be hard on yourself but don't be lazy, either. Just make a little progress day by day.

* Start a language exchange with a Japanese woman you want to develop a deeper relationship with.

* Pray that God will multiply your study time.

5. Make them feel safe and never judge. Just listen and pray. Trust is so important in vulnerability. One of my Japanese friends said she can

trust no one in her life because many betray her, especially men.

Charles Feltman defined trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions.” It is a grave responsibility when someone trusts us and is vulnerable with us, and we must honor that.

6. Impress on them that our great God loves us as we are—we don't need to be perfect, to try harder or to hide our struggles. We cannot gambaru enough for him to love us more, and often times we don't grow or overcome until we stop gambaru-ing and give our struggles to him. Brown says, “There are no pre-requisites to worthiness.” In Christian terms, “God loves you as you are.”

Exodus 14:4

“The Lord will fight for you. You need only to be still.”

Ephesians 3:17-19

“...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Isaiah 49:15-16

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion for the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; you walls are ever before me.”

Romans 5:8

“When we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

We as Christians who love Japan have a wonderful opportunity to love Japanese women and show them that our great God, our God of love and compassion, accepts them as they are and there is no

shame before him. If we can help them to be vulnerable with their struggles and weaknesses, we can help them to foster not only deeper relationships with others, but grow closer to understanding the heart of the God who made them and loves them unconditionally.

Some resources

Brene Brown's books. I have only read Rising Strong, but she has also written The Gifts of Imperfection and Daring Greatly. Her 2010 TED talk, The Power of Vulnerability is also a good resource.

This may sound like a shameless plug but, my books are also a good resource for life in Japan. You can find them on amazon, or at my website, www.annecrescini.com. Here is a list:

About Japanese culture:

1. Driving Me Crazy About It
2. Bathhouses and Bodybags
3. Barefoot Gaijin
4. Home
5. Social Issues Facing Modern Japan (edited by me, but student written)
6. Pain and Parasols (Coming December 2016)

My Memoirs About Eating Disorder and God's Strength to Overcome:

1. Weak Sauce
2. Awesome Sauce

English Language Textbooks

1. English Communication
2. English Presentation

Japanese Life and Culture

1. Japanese for Real Life—I highly recommend this one for those living in Japan, especially. It is an explanation of various Japanese systems like the medical and health care system, preschools, education, food, getting a haircut, the postal system, religion and rituals and more. It assumes that you can read hiragana, and after offering an overview, provides hundreds of useful words and phrases to help you navigate that situation.