



PRACTICING VULNERABILITY

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VULNERABILITY BUILDS TRUST

I know there are people out there who believe that vulnerability has no place at work. That showing vulnerability means you're weak. That no matter who you are or what position you hold, you should act like you have it all figured out, even when you don't.

I don't believe that at all.

Vulnerability is important because it builds trust. We don't trust the person who always has the answers, who doesn't need help, who never lets us in. We're all human: We know it's impossible to have it all together all the time, no matter how hard you try. That's why we *do* trust the person who admits when they don't know something. Who tells us when they're wrong. Who peels back the layers and shows us how things really are.

If you're not used to opening up to others about the way you think and feel, vulnerability can be a big challenge. But just like any other skill, getting used to being vulnerable takes practice. Being vulnerable and practicing vulnerability can look like so many things: Asking for help. Admitting you don't have the answer. Sharing more about your life experiences that made you who you are and giving context to how you behave. Giving feedback that's hard to give. Sharing an idea.

Whether you're new to showing vulnerability or you're looking to explore vulnerability with others, this guide will give you a starting point. These exercises are the same ones we do in our company. Being vulnerable with each other has made us stronger and has helped us build trust. We hope that this guide helps you get to know the people you're closest to even better and that it helps promote trust between you. Most of all, we hope it shows you that letting people in makes you stronger, not weaker.

If there's anything our team can do to support you, shoot us an email at hello@kristenhadeed.com. We would also love to hear about how these exercises impact you and whether they inspire you to make changes like they did for us.

Happy learning!



PRACTICING VULNERABILITY

This guide is less about taking you through a series of exercises and more about helping you shift your perspective. It's a starting point for practicing a skill and getting in the habit of using that skill over time.

At Student Maid, we practice being vulnerable by asking each other questions. They're not just any questions: These questions require us to dig deep and give up a piece of ourselves emotionally, which can be uncomfortable. Why are we asking about things that make us uncomfortable? Because positive things are easy to talk about. Vulnerability is about uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But as Brené Brown says, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy." You can't build trust and deep relationships without being willing to uncover your innermost self.

We want to help you practice vulnerability by asking yourself and the people closest to you these same kinds of questions. But we're not just handing you a list and leaving you to it! In this guide, you'll find our perspective on how to get in the right mindset so that you can get the most out of this exercise.



WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Before you get started, make sure you have:

- At least one other person. It should be someone you spend a lot of time with: a family member, friend, coworker, etc. You can connect with them via videoconference if need be.
- Great listening skills. (Need help with those? Check out our [Listening Training](#).)
- An open mind.
- A quiet, comfortable, private, safe space.

HOW TO CREATE A SAFE SPACE

It's important that you and the person/people doing this exercise with you feel comfortable and secure enough to answer these questions. Here are some parameters to set with them at the beginning of the exercise that will help you create that kind of space together:

- What's said during the exercise stays with the people involved.



- Emotions are welcome. Allow each other to express your answers however you need to express them.
- Be patient with each other. Stop and take breaks to recover and regroup if you need to.
- Let go of the instinct to respond. This is not the time for conversation; to build trust in each other, you need to practice simply hearing each other.
- Use this acronym, which we call the steps of listening:

Leave the distractions (physical and mental).

I am here for you. Make sure your body language is open.

Silence. Let them talk; don't interrupt.

Tell me more. Say this phrase when you feel like the other person has more to say to encourage them to dig deeper.

Empathy. Acknowledge the other person's emotion. For example, if they're angry, adjust your tone so they know that you understand they are angry.

Nonverbal cues, such as nodding your head and maintaining eye contact. These show someone you are still with them, even when you aren't speaking.

Also, remind each other that your answers don't have to be perfect. It's OK if you stumble over your words, if you forget some details and have to fill them in later, or if you find yourself giving a little more backstory than what's strictly necessary. Answering questions from a place of vulnerability is *hard*. You're giving words to a part of yourself that maybe has only existed in your head and your heart. Don't worry about getting it perfect; just focus on getting it *out*.

No matter how long you've known the other person (or other people) you do this exercise with, you will know them better and they will know you better afterward. You will also know yourself better. That's the goal!

START WITH YOURSELF

To get used to the idea, start by asking yourself the questions. Give yourself time to think deeply and reflect on each potential answer. You might find yourself caught between two answers: the "acceptable" or "easy" one and the one that scares you a little. Pick the one that scares you. It's probably your "real" answer.



When you're ready to sit down with another person (or people) and share your answers, we suggest choosing just three questions to answer at a time. It will help not to have time limits; give yourselves the space to take as long as you need to answer each question. If you don't have lots of time, start with just one question.

VULNERABILITY QUESTIONS

The questions below are the same ones that we've used in our company to practice vulnerability. It's by no means an exhaustive list of the questions you can ask during this exercise, so take it as a starting point:

- If you woke up tomorrow with no fear, what would you do first?
- Have you ever been hurt in love? If so, what happened? How has it affected you?
- If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
- In your life, what has been the biggest blessing in disguise?
- Do you ever find there are things about you that people misunderstand? What are they?
- When was the last time you cried? What was it about?
- What's one thing about the future that scares you?
- What things do others do for you that make you feel comfortable, loved, and appreciated?
- Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?
- Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
- What is one thing you should be doing but you're not, and it's preventing you from being a better you?
- Have you ever been bullied or made fun of? What happened? How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever hurt someone, intentionally or not? Did you make it right?
- What is a decision that you need to make but are putting off because you are afraid? Why is it hard to find the courage?
- What is your biggest insecurity?
- Have you ever lost someone close to you? How did it impact you?



DISCUSSION

When you finish answering these questions, we suggest that you take some time to reflect on the experience either by yourself or with the people who did the exercise with you. Doing so will help you understand the power of what you've just done by opening yourself up to others.

- **REFLECTION:** How did you feel *before* you answered these questions? Were you concerned about others' reactions? Were you apprehensive about sharing how you felt? Why or why not?

How did you feel while you were answering the questions? Did you find it difficult to answer them out loud? Why or why not? How did you feel answering the first question vs. the last? Did anything change about the way you answered? (Your demeanor, your comfort level, your confidence?) Which question was the hardest for you to answer? Why?

- **THINK BACK:** When in your life have you been vulnerable with the people closest to you? Did it have an affect on your relationship with that person/those people? If so, how?
- **THINK BIGGER:** Now that you've answered these questions and heard the answers of people close to you, do you think it will change anything about your relationship with them going forward? How else can you use vulnerability to enrich your life?



THINKING BIGGER:

How you can use vulnerability to connect in the workplace

We believe that vulnerability is a powerful tool for building relationships. So that you can see how you can apply the practice of vulnerability at your organization, here are some of the situations in which we use vulnerability to connect at Student Maid:

- **Icebreaker questions.** On the first official day of training at Student Maid, we ask each new hire to answer one of the following questions. These don't dig as deep as the ones we shared earlier in the guide (it is their first day, after all!), but each one still requires them to be vulnerable:
 - What is one of your most embarrassing moments?



- What's something that few people know about you?
 - If you could have dinner with one famous person, who would it be and why?
 - If you could replay a fun (or big) moment in your life, what would you choose and why?
 - Describe one past action (big or small) that you took to improve the quality of your life.
- **Company-wide meetings.** Once a quarter, we gather every person in our company together in one place for what we call Development Day. Each Development Day starts with answering questions like the ones in this guide. Our leaders give their answers first in front of the whole team in order to break the ice, and then our team members break off into groups of four or five to answer the questions among themselves. We don't have endless amounts of time to answer questions during Development Day, so we answer only three per meeting.
 - **Leadership team meetings.** We believe that in order for our company to be strong, the bond between our leaders must be strong. In meetings involving only leadership team members, we take the time to give below-the-surface updates on our personal lives so that we can better understand what each of us is facing outside of work. From time to time, we also answer vulnerability questions. Though our leadership team has worked closely together for years, we never fail to learn something new about each other when we do this.
 - **Company updates.** Being vulnerable isn't just about sharing something personal about yourself. It's also about being honest about what's going on in your organization and in your own role, even if the news isn't good. (*Especially* if the news isn't good.) No one can have all the answers all the time, and we believe it's important that no one on our team—not even our leaders—ever feels like they have to pretend to have an answer they don't. Sometimes, being vulnerable is as simple as saying, "I don't know." And when it's the leader who makes that concession, it doesn't mean the leader is weak or failing at their job. It may just mean they need help. Admitting that can help the rest of the team see how they can step up and offer support in new ways.



WORK-RELATED VULNERABILITY QUESTIONS

Below is a set of questions to get you thinking about how you can practice vulnerability in the workplace:

- What are the two best qualities or strengths that you bring to your workplace? What are your two worst qualities or weaknesses?
- When you're working, what are you doing when you feel most engaged? What are you doing when you feel least engaged?
- What is the latest job-related accomplishment you're most proud of?
- What is something you've really struggled with at work? If it's something you're still struggling with, what can others do to help?
- In general, what's your mood on Sunday nights? Are you feeling anxious about the work week ahead? Excited? Stressed? Hopeful? What do you think contributes most to these feelings?
- Have you had a conflict with a coworker that really affected you? If so, what happened, how did it make you feel, and do you feel that it's resolved?
- Do you feel you have the support you need to do your job to the best of your ability? Why or why not?
- What can your teammates do to make you feel more comfortable or more valued in your role? What can your team leader do?
- Do you feel that your role is the right fit for you? Why or why not? If it's not, what, if anything, could make it right for you?
- How do you want to grow professionally? What can your team do to help you?
- Where do you see yourself in five years? In the same role? In the same company? Or in a completely different place?



FINAL THOUGHTS

Remember: “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy.” This is *hard work*, but it’s worth it. It will help you build the relationships you aspire to have with the ones you love and work more efficiently with your team. We all have things going on in our lives, and we want to feel heard and understood. Wouldn’t the world be a better place if we could show up in every aspect of life feeling that way?

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