

An Editor's Invitation: Showing Vulnerability

Category: Showing Vulnerability

written by Paul Gross | September 1, 2019

I used to believe that showing vulnerability was a bad thing.

When I was a college student, I received a phone call from my parents. My cousin had been in a car accident. She'd been in the back seat of a Volkswagen beetle that rolled off the highway. No one was hurt, except for her.

And she'd been killed.

The news hit me like a punch. My cousin had been about twenty. Her family and mine had spent many summers and Christmases together. We'd gotten along well. She was lively and pretty.

And now she was gone.

Although I had good friends at college, I didn't tell a soul. At the time, I believed that this was the most virtuous, most courageous way to handle this. Better not to talk about it. Better not to express the messy feelings I was having. Better to sit in a room by myself and ride this out on my own.

And I did. The feelings did pass, at which point I felt better, but also a little less whole, as if I'd left a part of myself back in that room.

That was many years (and many sessions of psychotherapy) ago.

Now I edit a publication that features deeply personal stories about healthcare experiences. Now I teach residents and medical students who struggle with fatigue, with feelings of inadequacy, with anxiety and with the ache of looking after people who suffer and who sometimes die under their care.

Now I believe that showing vulnerability is, in general, a good thing. We are all vulnerable. It's part of the human condition. As a colleague once said to me, "You never know what someone is going through at two in the morning."

I once lost a colleague to suicide. I consider myself a fairly perceptive person, and yet I hadn't a clue that this colleague had been suffering. None of us did. Could showing some vulnerability have saved this life?

I want students and residents to feel at ease acknowledging their vulnerability. If they're suffering, I hope they let someone know. I, for

one, can't fix their duty hours, their personal relationships or the patient whose potassium they wish they'd checked one more time. But I can listen. I can acknowledge their grief and guilt. I can offer myself as an equally vulnerable human. I've been there. I know what it's like to hurt, to believe that I've messed up.

I also want patients to feel comfortable expressing their vulnerability. My patient's emotional distress is often a bigger source of discomfort than their physical ailments. And unless we can talk about what hurts, it's going to be tough to get them feeling better.

And that's part of the reason that *Pulse* exists, isn't it? To provide a safe space where anyone—patient, health professional, student—can describe a situation that brought out their vulnerability.

We, the reading audience, can be the balm. We can listen and nod. We can say, *We understand your hurt. That must have been painful. You did your best...*

We can be the comforting hand rather than the finger of blame.

This month's *More Voices* theme is Showing Vulnerability.

Can you think of times where you've shown—or not shown—vulnerability to a health professional or patient, to a colleague or student? How was it received? What happened next?

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