

The Gifts of Imperfection Summary

By Brené Brown

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

The Gifts of Imperfection, teaches us not to change ourselves to adapt to expectations, instead, we should embrace and engage with our imperfections. The core insights center on empathy, understanding, and adopting "wholehearted living," so that we start living for ourselves, and not for other people.

Wholehearted living is a philosophy about being able to wake up every morning and think, 'No matter what gets done, or how much is left undone; I am enough.' And, it's also about going to bed at night and acknowledging our imperfections, vulnerabilities, and fears. Brown maintains that despite our flaws, the ultimate truth is that every human can be brave, and is worthy of love and belonging.

Brené Brown is a professor, best-selling author, public speaker, and podcaster, and she has a fresh approach to popular discussions. There are so many books centered around the ideas and ideals of love, belonging, and worthiness. Brown's approach offers a unique insight because it's based on her research around shame. Although Brown is a researcher, she describes herself as a "story catcher." In this way, she's managed to explore many people's concerns and ideas regarding shame and vulnerability. She suggests some shifts that we need to make, to engage in life from a place of worthiness. In other words, to live wholeheartedly.

This brief summary illustrates that wholeheartedness is a skill that anyone can learn. But, according to Brown, it means letting go of the search for perfection, and it also means stopping the need to want to please others constantly. Furthermore, it's about learning to embrace who we are, with all of our flaws. The truth is that we connect with others through our vulnerabilities, not our perfect facades. *The Gifts of Imperfection*, explains why embracing who we are, takes courage, compassion, and authentic connection. The book isn't just theoretical advice though, Brown offers ten practical guideposts to wholehearted living, and provides daily practices to help us on this journey.

Connection to Others is What Matters, and Gives Us Purpose

As a social worker, Brené Brown was confident of one thing - our connection to others matters. This, she argues, is what gives purpose to our lives.

When Brown began her doctorate, she wanted to investigate how we develop meaningful connections. But, as often happens along the research road, she ran into an important finding, which was the notion of shame. This research took her on what she refers to as "an 8-year detour". This new angle encouraged her to understand the anatomy of shame, and how it affects us. Shame, she argues, erodes connection.

Three Things About Shame

There are three things that Brené Brown says that she knows, absolutely,

about shame.

The first thing is that all of us carry it around with us. In other words, shame is universal. Shame is one of the most primitive of human emotions, and despite this, we're uncomfortable talking about it. The problem is that the less we open up about it, the more it controls us. Shame flourishes in the company of secrecy, silence, and judgment.

Brown also argues that shame is different from guilt. While guilt tells us that we may have done something terrible, shame takes the focus away from the action itself and reframes it around the person. In other words, it makes us feel as if we're bad. Shame targets the core of who we are, whereas guilt addresses our behavior. Although guilt might be an uncomfortable feeling, it can also be constructive if we use it to highlight how we can grow and improve. Shame, on the other hand, is usually destructive.

At the heart of shame is that it carries the fear of disconnection. We feel that something about us, would make us unworthy of love and belonging, if others knew or saw it. Hence, there's an excruciating sense of vulnerability that underpins shame.

What Brené Brown didn't expect to uncover is that vulnerability is the key to cultivating deep, authentic connections. She realized that people who feel that they belong, and are loved, believe they're worthy of relationships. If we don't feel worthy, we hold back.

When Brown analyzed her interviews with people, who had a deep sense of worthiness, she noticed that they dared to be imperfect. They were able to be compassionate to themselves first, and then to others. What's more, is that they could then connect because of their authenticity. They

were willing to let go of who they thought they should be, and just be who they were. They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed what made them vulnerable, made them beautiful. They didn't see vulnerability as uncomfortable or excruciating, but just another aspect of themselves that they were willing to acknowledge.

An Insight Into Vulnerability

Two examples of vulnerability include being willing to say, "I love you," before someone else does, and to do something with no guarantees of a successful outcome. Brown was able to embrace her vulnerability after going through a personal journey. She jokingly calls this journey a "mini-breakdown, slash, spiritual awakening."

This journey is how she developed ten guideposts that mark the course towards wholehearted living. These include authenticity, compassion, a resilient spirit, gratitude and joy, faith, creativity, meaningful work, play and rest, a sense of calm and stillness, and remembering to laugh and dance along the way.

However, each guidepost is like a two-sided coin. For example, to cultivate authenticity, we need to be willing to let go of caring about what people think. To cultivate compassion, we need to let go of perfectionism, and to develop resilience. We need to let go of numbing ourselves against pain.

The First Three Guideposts

The first three guideposts are authenticity, compassion, and resilience. These are important because they speak to the very core of our being.

Cultivate Authenticity and Let Go of What Others

Think

Authenticity is a collection of choices, that we make every day. It's how we choose to present ourselves, and the extent to which we're real and honest. Choosing to be authentic isn't easy. The key to authenticity is juggling the need to be honest, without making others feel uncomfortable. It's also about speaking our minds, without making others feel hurt, or upset. It's daring to disagree, without being controversial or sounding like a know-it-all. Ultimately it's a balancing act, and these choices can make us feel both hopeful and exhausted.

No matter how we play it, authenticity isn't a safe option, and we'll sometimes have to choose to be real over being liked. However, sacrificing who we are for the sake of what others think isn't worth it. If we play it safe, we risk feeling a host of heavy emotions such as anxiety, depression, and resentment. Brené Brown believes that there's something sacred in standing our ground.

So unlocking one's authenticity takes courage. Courage is the key to authenticity. In its earliest form, the word courage meant, "to speak one's mind with one's whole heart." Nowadays, courage has more heroic connotations. Brown suggests that we go back to its earliest meaning, and therefore embrace wholehearted living. Courage enables us to be vulnerable and to risk disappointment. Courage allows us to get our hopes up, even if there's a chance that things won't pan out the way we'd

hoped. Brown also learned that playing down the exciting stuff, doesn't take away the pain if it doesn't happen. However, it does minimize the joy if it does come about. The beautiful thing about courage is its ripple effect. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little stronger and the world a little braver.

Brown suggests that the anatomy of authenticity means cultivating the courage to be imperfect. So to become more authentic and courageous, we need to set boundaries, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We also all need to practice more compassion, which stems from deep self-acceptance, and knowing that we're all a combination of strengths and struggles. Finally, it's essential to nurture the connection, and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe we're enough, which requires us to develop self-compassion.

Cultivate Compassion and Let Go of Perfectionism

Brené Brown is a self-confessed recovering perfectionist, and an aspiring "good-enoughist." With this in mind, she encourages all of us to suggest shifting the focus from what others may think of us, to self-improvement.

How often do you shame yourself about how you look? Many of us are ashamed of how we look; often, feeling different makes us feel that we aren't worthy of love and belonging. Brown encourages, "healthy striving talk," which means doing things for oneself rather than for others. So, to overcome perfectionism, we need to practice self-compassion.

Here's the thing about perfectionism. Perfectionism isn't the same as striving to be your best. Perfectionism tries to convince us that if we look perfect, and act perfectly, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame,

judgment, and shame. Perfectionism is a shield. It's also different from self-improvement. At its core, perfectionism is about trying to earn approval and acceptance. We believe that what we accomplish dictates our self-worth.

All of us need to be more understanding of ourselves when we feel the pain of inadequacy. Brené Brown says that only when we can be present with our own darkness can we be present with others' darkness too. So, compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity. It involves understanding that feelings of personal inadequacies are part of a shared human experience, and something that we all go through.

Brown's message about compassion is that, all of us need to be more mindful of how we act towards ourselves. Furthermore, she suggests taking a balanced approach to negative emotions, so that these feelings are neither exaggerated nor suppressed. Being mindful requires us to hold back from identifying with our thoughts and feelings, so that we aren't swept away by them.

Cultivate a Resilient Spirit and Let Go of Numbing and Powerlessness

Another unexpected discovery for Brown was that there's no such thing as selective numbing. When we numb the dark, we also numb the light. When we try to take the edge off pain and vulnerability, we also unintentionally dull our joy, our presence, and our happiness.

So how do we stay mindful and authentic when we're stressed?

Brown argues that resilient people are resourceful, with solid problem-solving skills. She says that these people are also likely to seek help, and believe that they can manage their feelings.

Another key finding from her research was that one of the crucial factors in resilience is spirituality. And, by spirituality, she isn't referring to religion or theology. For Brown, spirituality involves recognizing and celebrating that we're all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us. Our connection to that power, and to one another, is grounded in love and compassion. Brown advises practicing spirituality to bring about a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.

Purpose and perspective are paramount. When coping with adversity or trauma, a sense of purpose and perspective allows us to move forward. With this, a deep understanding of spirituality enables us to cultivate hope, practice critical awareness, and let go of numbing.

An Exercise for When You're Feeling Down

Next time you're feeling down, Brown suggests going through the following checklist. It's the A -E -I- O -U -Y.

A is to ask, have I been absent today?

E is whether or not you've exercised.

I is asking what you've done for yourself today.

O is about others, and focusing on what you've done for other people.

U is interrogating whether you may be holding onto unexpressed emotions.

Y is for "Yeah!" In other words, focus on gratitude and focus on something good that's happened on that particular day.

In Conclusion

Brené Brown guides us through her research and her conversations with other people. She believes that wholehearted living is revolutionary. A revolution might sound a bit dramatic, but it's a bold act of resistance, to choose authenticity and worthiness over shame and guilt.

We're living in a culture of shaming ourselves and others, so there's never been a better time to engage with Brown's tenets for life. It's a movement fueled by the freedom that comes when we stop pretending that everything is okay when it isn't.

Brown invites us to own our stories, and embrace lives that are messy, imperfect, wild, wonderful, heartbreaking, grace-filled, and joyful. Furthermore, if we can find someone who has earned the right to hear our story, we need to tell it. And, if we choose to step forward, into the journey of wholehearted living, we might feel confused, and terrify lots of people, including ourselves.

It's not an easy process, and we'll wonder how it's possible to feel so brave and so afraid, simultaneously. Because, according to Brown, to live

wholeheartedly is to feel brave, afraid, and, most importantly, alive.

Remember, shame loses its power when spoken. So speak your shame.