

Laying the base for CSX-Care: From Burn-out, Stress, Isolation, and Shame to Self-Care, Connection, Vulnerability, and Community Care

“Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives for a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion, and connection to wake up in the morning and think no matter what gets done and how much I left undone, I am enough.”

- Brené Brown

Introduction

Very often our internalized shame, negative mental chatter and the rejection or silencing of our own vulnerability prevents us from accessing joy and leading fulfilling lives. At the same time, feelings of extreme stress and burnout, which have been proven to be detrimental to our physical and mental health, can also lead to a sense of isolation and disconnection from others around us which in turn hinders our ability to integrate into our communities. In light of this, learning how to take care of ourselves through acts of Self-Care is paramount to support our physical and mental well being, including a healthy sense of worth and self-esteem within us, which then opens the door to taking care of loved ones and other people in our communities. In addition to this idea of Self-Care as a gateway to community care, we also know that embracing and healing our shame, while allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, is one of the first steps towards self-compassion, which in turn is essential in learning how to be compassionate to others. In this chapter, we aim to present how shame, vulnerability, self-care and community care interrelate to one another and how they help build the necessary foundation for mutual care in interdependent communities, and thus for community-supported projects (CSX). Furthermore, we argue that by looking at the role of shame and vulnerability within our personal life, as we simultaneously learn to take care of ourselves, we then lay a solid foundation for learning how to support others. We then suggest that at the birthplace between healthy sustainable self-care and community care, people and communities are able to shift from a hyper-individualized lifestyle (isolation, disconnection) to a more collective community-centered approach (belonging and connection) that finally creates the perfect recipe for the creation of CSX Projects and a more inclusive and kinder economy for all.

The Connection between Vulnerability, Shame and Community Care

According to Luna Dolezal: Shame is characterized as a self-assessment emotion that causes a person to feel anxiety related to the idea of how one is perceived or judged by others (Dolezal, 2017 p. 423). It has an intrinsic relational component and is considered to be a universal emotion, inherent to the human condition. Despite the fact that shame is not a priori negative, it can lead to detrimental consequences when left unchecked. Furthermore, there are a wide array of expressions and intensities of shame¹ experiences. Since people's shame-stories differ from person to person and also vary according to cultural and social contexts, some general examples of shame include fearing being perceived negatively, feelings of embarrassment or self-loathing for previous mistakes and failures or a generalized preoccupation with doubting one's ability to achieve success in a certain area of life (career, education, personal relationships, etc.).

Now that we know more about what shame entails, how does it then connect to vulnerability, self-care and community care? One of the most passionate researchers on the topic of shame, the US-american professor and writer Brené Brown discovered, after conducting numerous interviews, that individuals with a stronger sense of belonging (family, friends and community) had something in common. These individuals frequently made the choice to be vulnerable. Whether it meant taking a risk, saying I love you or investing in relationships whose future was uncertain, they equally "didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they talk about it being excruciating, they just talked about it being necessary". This research conducted by Brown suggests that there is a strong correlation between the ability to engage in life with vulnerability and a sense of community or belonging.

Having said this, let us now explore the connection between vulnerability and shame. The famous French existentialist, philosopher and writer Jean Paul Sartre in his book *"Being and Nothingness"* stated "It is shame or pride which reveals to me the Other's look and myself at the end of the look". This means that for Sartre shame was an experience that came to life in the presence of another. *"It is a reaction to the fact that I am a body in the world that is constituted not only by me, but by others as well"* (Gyllenhammer, 2014). So if shame is embodied in

¹It is important to highlight that guilt is different from shame. A feeling of guilt occurs when one feels that one has done something wrong or inadequate. In contrast, shame is the feeling that something is wrong with one's self or that one is underderving.

the presence of others what does it then allude to? Which fear or terror lies entrenched within shame? Simply put, disconnection. Shame occurs when our needs and expectations for affection, acceptance or belonging are threatened. Shame arises when we fear we will be cast aside, because at the core of our humanity losing our social bonds, “spells the fear of abandonment, the death by emotional starvation”. It is therefore not surprising that various victims of abandonment have expressed experiencing strong feelings related to dying. This translates to the idea that if shame speaks of an ultimate fear of abandonment, disconnection, and of eventual death, vulnerability is the bridge to belonging, connection, and aliveness. In order to fully experience love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity, vulnerability is required. And as we now know, vulnerability comes easier when we feel that we belong.

To illustrate a real life example of the above, Susana, one of our group members, decided to share her own shame and vulnerability story. Approximately four years ago, Susana was suddenly left by her former partner. They had both been in a loving committed relationship, when seemingly out of the blue, her partner decided to leave for another person and move to another country. Susana, who had moved to Europe to join him, found herself suddenly on her own. She was in a foreign country with no access to social, financial, medical or emotional support. Due to the suddenness of the events and the daring circumstances, she soon developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For a long while she felt ugly, unloved and disposable, she too claims that the abandonment felt like death. The PTSD also hindered her ability to concentrate, function and to carry out even the simplest of tasks. She then moved to Germany to build a new life, since she had always felt a connection through her German grandmother. Her vulnerability story started the day she moved. She mastered her German, worked exhaustively to obtain her visa, joined a rowing club to meet people, and shared her story with loved ones. In order to heal the trauma, she decided to take part in a creative project (Boudoir Photo Shooting) with the purpose of celebrating her story, her body, her pain and her journey. Her shame taught her that the lack of love she felt was never personal, and that even though painful it had given her a chance to learn how to unapologetically love and support herself. Today she looks back with pride at her accomplishments and she claims to have regained her self-worth and even improved her self-confidence after these events, which lets her engage with people and life in a much more vulnerable way. Now lastly, after learning about the connection between

shame, vulnerability and community care (belonging) the next section of this chapter will further connect the elements of Self-care and Community Care.

The Connection between Self-Care and Community Care

It is no secret that many of us are often juggling numerous tasks and endless To-do lists between our jobs and our personal lives. When our lists become lengthy, the task of taking care of ourselves frequently falls to the lowest rank of our priorities. As a result, we then begin to engage in negative habits such as eating poorly, consuming excessive amounts of junk food, binge-watching, excessive scrolling and usage of social media among others. In other more serious cases we turn to addiction or self-destructive behaviors in an attempt to cope with our pain.² However, for many of us, who are privileged enough, the above-mentioned scenario of exhaustion (when we decide to push through the stress for days, weeks, or even months at a time without pausing to check-in with ourselves) can often lead to burnout and other emotional health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

So what does it then mean to practise self-care? As a broad exploration, self-care makes room for overall well being and individual nurturing of one's needs. Self-care can also be understood as an ongoing project of holding space for ourselves with intention, meaning and purpose. It is also not a one-time event, but similar to sport and fitness it is muscle that we learn to train. In the words of R. Hughes, despite the fact that self-care can seem like an alien or unfamiliar concept to us, learning how to meet our needs is an integral part of looking after ourselves: Furthermore, "It is an important ingredient of resilience where we assert our right for positive self-worth and self-confidence together with a willingness to value and appreciate ourselves... It's not selfish; it's about taking responsibility to and for ourselves." (Hughes, 2019, p. 316). So if we consider this, Self-care isn't a luxury or something that must be earned, but rather a vital aspect of our life as humans. We deserve to care for ourselves, deeply, simply because we exist in this world.

In the spirit of illustrating this theme of self-care, one of the authors of this chapter decided to also share his own story. Saksham, who in recent years moved to Germany, learned the hard way that by moving, one can achieve a

² It is important to highlight that there are a myriad of other elements, such as personal trauma, and the socio-economic, political and environmental conditions of an individual, which play a vital role in an individual's ability to thrive within a given society.

great deal of independence. Yet if not careful, there are equally many opportunities to lose one's direction in life. After relocating to Berlin, Saksham started traveling over Europe because it provided him with the opportunity to meet new people and discover other cultures. Being an introvert, he found it easier to meet people while he was intoxicated with alcohol or other substances, which resulted in a series of poor choices. This led him to what he refers to as “a miserable life”, with added health complications. These actions had been undertaken while trying to conceal his actual true self. After hitting rock bottom and being admitted to the hospital, he then made the decision to start taking care of himself, and help those who were experiencing similar problems. After this incident he traveled back to India to reconnect with his roots and childhood friends and has ever since started a journey of self-care. He has become physically active and makes use of his habits to pursue his passions and build a fulfilling life, including starting his own company.

The above-mentioned example makes it evident that for many of us who feel guilty about taking time for self-care when we have other responsibilities is a barrier. We must learn to eventually let go of the fear, since in most cases, it builds more walls than bridges. We also ought to reach out for assistance as well as create and nurture connections with neighbors and friends. Doing this gives us a sense of completeness, belonging, and tremendous empowerment through community. When we have a community to share and be a part of, our capacity for compassion and understanding is multiplied. Asking for assistance and seeking support are therefore not indicators of weakness; rather, they are signs of the courage and strength it takes to not only meet our needs but to also to aid those around us. Hence, community care and self-care are closely intertwined since none of us exists in isolation; we are always in a relationship with those who are around us.

Final Thoughts: How does this all connect to CSX?

We now understand how shame, vulnerability, self-care, and community care are related. To dive deeper into how it all relates to CSX, we had the opportunity of interviewing Laura from the CSX Network.

During the interview, Laura stated that she initially experienced feelings of anxiety and fear when taking part in CSX projects (the earlier phases). She also mentioned that without these emotions, she wouldn't have been able to expand outside of her comfort zone. More particular, without this sense of shame, we

are unable to fully understand our capabilities. In whatever place they enter, regardless of who they are, people compare themselves to others, typically those who are stronger and more experienced. She refers to this emotion as fear of falling short of others rather than shame. Her ideas on the impacts of vulnerability to deal with shame were one of the most intriguing things she said. All of these human emotions, such as fear, anxiety, embarrassment, and the desire to avoid making mistakes, have an impact on the projects at CSX in one way or another. For instance, people are reluctant to join ongoing CSX projects, people are hesitant to start a new project, people doubt their own abilities, and they are reluctant to give ideas that could be really helpful. Therefore, shame and vulnerability help people grow, perform better, and succeed, which motivates CSX participants to complete and enhance their tasks. In her words: "If team members are able to create a circle of trust, being vulnerable and honest about feelings and emotions may accelerate the process of dealing with shame and make us move forward." In addition to this, Laura also provided us with insightful answers regarding self-care. In her opinion self-care serves the community just like community care serves the individual. She also argued that taking care of communities can act as an important practice of self-care therefore in her opinion there is a direct relationship between both. According to her "Interdependencies between Self-Care and Community Care largely define our social coexistence". She further described that self-care and community care in CSX can take form in mutual respect, good communication and consideration for people's personal circumstances. She also stated that "Yes, I think Self-Care is an important aspect in CSX because it is an essential part to happiness. It is not about sacrificing oneself for others but finding a balance between one's own happiness and a satisfying community. Achieving one will not be possible without considering the other one."

In conclusion, even though this chapter has been a brief introduction to the complex and ever important interrelation between the topics of shame, vulnerability, self-care and community care in the context of CSX, we are hopeful that it will help lay the base for anyone interested in either creating or joining a CSX Project.

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Interviewees

We conducted 3 interviews using open-ended questions with the opportunity to share further information and stories. The individuals we spoke with are:

- A former CSX project member (previous active member of a CSA and NGO Projects)
- An Organizational Development Consultant & Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Trainer
- A person from the Emergency department, Altona (Hamburg)