

10. The Strength in Vulnerability - with Dr. Michael Hersh



FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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Arpita: Hey everybody. Welcome back to another episode of Doctors Living Deliberately. I am Dr. Arpita Gupta DePalma and I'm excited to have Dr. Hersh with me here today. We are gonna talk a little bit about something that a lot of times we don't like talking about. And that's vulnerability, why we struggle with it and what makes us so fearful of just being open, exposing ourselves. Michael, how are you doing? How's it going?

Michael: Hi. I am doing great and yes, you're totally right. Vulnerability is one of those things that I think nobody really wants to address or talk about. But it's so important and it's one of the things that kind of pulled me into coaching more. It wasn't the reason I signed up for coaching. And so it's become something that I really think is so important to talk about. So I'm glad we get this opportunity to kind of chat about it.

Arpita: Yeah, I do. I love these episodes because you and I get to kind of really talk about things that are really important to us and might be areas that we have enjoyed kind of discovering for ourselves and that's allowed us to kind of also teach other people. And I think that that's really impactful. But yeah, I realized with vulnerability for me, I really, you know, I enjoyed talking to clients about their anger and the vulnerability piece with that really comes along with regards to just allowing ourselves to recognize what is underlying the anger. And a lot of times we don't wanna feel that cause it doesn't feel good, right? And so what we do is instead of being vulnerable and feeling the yucky underlying feelings, we show up angry. So that that's an area that I love to explore with my clients. Another area is also just with relationships. You know, that's the biggest piece is why we sometimes hold back or are not really comfortable expressing ourselves fully with the people who are closest to us, you know? And a lot of that, again, is that fear of judgment or fear of getting hurt, maybe fear of just exposing ourselves. I can't wait to hear what you have to teach us about this today. Tell us all the things Michael.

Michael: Well, sure. So for me, when I originally signed up for coaching, I was stressed about all of these different things that were going on at work. I had, you know a wait list that was really overwhelming me. I had different you know practice locations that I was going to, that frustrated me in different ways. And so when I signed up for coaching, my primary goal was to sort out a lot of these work related challenges I was facing. All of these things were definitely kind of propelling me into burnout, and it just, I was so overwhelmed by all of these things, and so I remember, I was in a program that had a group coaching component. And in the group coaching component, you get to speak one-to-one with the coach, but there's all these other people watching and you can't see them. You can't see their faces. You don't know what they're thinking. And so I remember getting coached that evening. It was a great conversation with the coach, and I got off the call feeling so much better about those work related issues that I had brought to the call that night. And then I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned all night long thinking about what all the other doctors on that call thought of me. Did they think that my issues were dumb? Did they think that all of these things that were bothering me, that were overwhelming me, that they really weren't all that important? Do I come off as weak

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when I complain about these things?

And so I brought these thoughts to a one-to-one coaching call and it was there that I realized, man, my big issue isn't with all of these things that are going on at work, it's that I have been hiding for so long. I just prefer not to be seen. And I have a huge issue with vulnerability. And part of kind of the process that I've been going through over the last couple of years is getting comfortable leaning into vulnerability because, I had carried with me this thought that vulnerability was a weakness, right? And so if I allowed myself to be seen, then I was opening myself up to judgment. And by virtue of that, people were gonna think all kinds of things about me.

And the truth was that as I leaned into the vulnerability, I started feeling better, meeting more people and finally started being able to live my life more deliberately, more intentionally, and building much deeper relationships with the people, that I already, with new friends, and also deeper relationships with the people in my life. And so that's when I realized how important vulnerability is and why I think it's such an important topic for us to talk about.

Arpita: Yeah, totally. I thought in my brain while you were talking that, oh, it's like when you have this dream that you're naked in the audience or something, or naked up on stage, and everybody, everybody can see you. Right? But yeah, it's, you know, I think you hit on a couple of really, really important points. But the first thing is, what I realized is just having that compassion for yourself, right? To be able to recognize that, I have fear of exposing myself or whatever it is. I have fear of sharing and just maybe honestly, just having love for yourself, compassion for yourself to say, Hey, I do recognize that I'm having these emotions and I am okay with it. I'm going to allow it to be there. But then also the next step is having that courage to say, Hey. I'm going to put it out there. I have the ability to put it out there. What I'm feeling is not unusual or atypical. It might be there with other people or in terms of other people having it and then despite all of those things, you get that ability to connect with those other people once you actually put yourself out there. So it's almost a couple of steps of it, having that love for yourself, the compassion for yourself to recognize you're having those emotions, but then also having the courage then to speak about it be open with others. So there's a lot of pieces I think that tie in together to allow yourself to take that first step to jump in.

Michael: Absolutely. And you know, you and I are here doing this podcast because we know how important it is to live deliberately and intentionally, and part of that is leaning into vulnerability. And for me you know, the idea of me doing a podcast and recording myself and doing videos three years ago, that would've been unfathomable to me. And a year and a half ago, I committed to sitting down and writing blog posts because for me, that was a giant leap in terms of writing down the things I was thinking and the things that I was feeling. But I still preferred to be hiding behind the page, behind the screen and not be seen and in order to kind of start to live the life that I really wanted to be living, I did have to lean into the discomfort that is being seen, that is vulnerability.

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And there's a really powerful quote from Brene Brown, I really love. She talks about vulnerability, and she says, vulnerability is courage in you and inadequacy in me. I'm drawn to your vulnerability, but repelled by mine. And what I take away from that is when I am vulnerable with other people, right? To me it feels, it can feel really raw. It can feel awful in some ways, but in that same process, I'm creating a connection with you that didn't previously exist, and it deepens that relationship. And becoming aware of that has really changed my life in so many ways because when you can stop hiding, when you can start being vulnerable with other people, you open up all of these opportunities in your life that didn't previously exist, and you get to start living the life that is more authentic, that is more of what you want. How do you think that that shows up for you?

Arpita: Oh, totally. I, I immediately, my brain goes to like, saying, sorry, first. Right? To your spouse or to your loved ones, or to your friends. Part of this is just what do we get out of being right? And a lot of times we're scared to, again, be the first person to say, I'm sorry, because we think it's us showing weakness or we're being vulnerable by kind of admitting wrong doing or being wrong, and that kind of holds us back. And inevitably, what's the expense of that? What's the cost of that? Right? Not being willing to say, I'm sorry first, a lot of times leads to further strife and it's a lack of that connection, lack of that intimacy with your partner or friends or whoever it is. Another example is just even like saying, I love you. Right? A lot of times we're just scared to say it because our brain is thinking in our head, what if they don't say it back? What if they don't feel the same? What does it matter, right? Because when we feel the expression of when we have the feelings of love, when we are expressing it, we get to do that for our own sake. And again, a lot of times it's that fear of that lack of reciprocation from the other person, we make it mean that we are not loved. Right? And so I just wanna ask you, what is, is it worth it? Is it worth risking the relationship or worth not getting to feel those positive emotions? Because you're afraid of going first. Right? And so I think it's important to see that.

I remember I had a, I was on a group coaching call a couple of days ago, and one of the people was talking about how she is fearful of expressing things to her husband because she has a fear that he will pass, that he will die. And so you know, she went on about how she's scared of being vulnerable with him and being open with him because she does not want to risk the pain of doing that, and then him potentially passing. And of course, like there's nothing wrong with him. It's just our fear of what if our loved ones go. And ultimately what we were able to show her with that session was just helping her recognize that her, she's already losing out. She's already losing out by not having that connection with her husband now out of fear of what might happen. Right? And so what's the point of doing that? Do we not, the whole purpose, and this is a person that she has a wonderful relationship with her husband, but it was her own fear to protect her own heart from pain, right? But that's inevitably preventing them from actually having a deeper, stronger connection and that like, intimate feeling of we are together, we are on the same page here. So, you know, being able to recognize that your lack of vulnerability is really just hurting you right now in the moment, versus being able to build stronger

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connections with other people.

Michael: Yeah. And it holds you back from moving forward. Right? So another aspect of vulnerability, and you, you actually brought this up already, is kind of the fear of shame that could come about from being vulnerable, right? So, you know, you coach a lot of people around anger, right? And so when people are kind of dealing with their anger, but then also fearing the vulnerability of leaning into why they're angry all the time. Right? There's this kind of double-edged sword of like I wanna work this out. I want to change and to move forward, but I'm worried about the shame of what will people think. And this was something huge for me, right? So, you know where I did my GI fellowship training was a very, very challenging couple of years for me. And there was a ton of overwhelm, a ton of frustration, and I was not the happy GI fellow. I was not the easy person to call and ask for a GI consult. And so as I started kind of leaning into coaching and deciding that I wanted to be a coach, all of these kind of things came flooding back to me. How can I put myself out there and talk to people about vulnerability, about shame, about all of these things, knowing who I was when I was a fellow in training and the truth was I had to look at that head on and say to myself, yes, this is who you were. Right? And you were doing the best you could at the time, right? You were kind of overwhelmed and exhausted and again, just doing the best that you could with the resources that you had at the time. And that is not the person who I wanted to be, and it's not the person who I am today, but I have to be okay with who I was. And then I have to lean into it and say, yes. But if I hold back now, if I don't talk about these things now, I am not the only one, in fact, I know that that tradition of the angry GI fellow lives on where I did my training. I, I continue to hear stories all the time from people that came before me and the people that came after me in that training program.

But it's important to talk about it because it's the reality of what medical training can be for us. But it doesn't define who we are. And so leaning into the vulnerability, having an opportunity to talk about things and showing people that who you have been, who you were, doesn't define you and doesn't have to mean anything about who you are today. That's why we're here today, and that's why talking about vulnerability is so vital.

Arpita: It's funny that you've said that cause as you're talking about the fellowship, I remember when I had decided I'm going to become a coach and I'm going to start doing this work, you know, creating the copy for my brochure and creating the copy for my website. And I just remembered having this fear that wow, I'm gonna put it all out there. I'm gonna put it out there that I have been angry and how I show up and how I am embarrassed with how I showed up with my kids. And I am really, really fearful of the repercussions of that or what people might think. And then immediately what I recognized is that A, nobody really cared, like in a negative manner. And B, it allowed people, other people to say, Hey I have the same issues. I'm so glad you said that. Can we talk more? Right? It opens up the option to have the conversation about things that we feel like we're the only people struggling with, but that's really not the case. A lot of people are dealing with similar struggles in their life, and if we are not vulnerable by allowing ourselves to discuss it openly, we are not allowing for

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those conversations, we're not allowing for that healing. And that's what's so important by being able to take that first step and speak about it.

And you touched a little bit about that, you know, being vulnerable with the anger and the shame around that. And really, yes, the first step is that vulnerability around being able to admit that I'm angry and I'm showing up that way. And you have the shame, but the bigger piece of it is figuring out what is underneath, right? Why am I so angry? What am, am I disappointed in my kids because they didn't get some award? Or am I embarrassed because my, you know, family member behaved inappropriately at a party or get together. Whatever it is that is really underlying that overlying emotion is where we have to become and allow ourselves to be vulnerable to feel it. And that's where it takes that compassion and it takes that courage for our, our own sakes for ourselves to begin the process to allow it to be there. Right?

And I think the other piece is also just recognizing that when we have that fear of not being vulnerable with our spouse. I mean, I have even, as I'm speaking, I'm thinking of clients that are like, I don't know why I have such a hard time opening up. I'm married to this person for God's sake. And a lot of it goes back to their fear of I'm not good enough. Fear of what if they leave me right? And these are all those, again, going back to our thoughts that our brain is creating to keep us safe, protect us from exposing ourselves to danger. And that's where it starts with. And now we get to recognize that we don't have to continue that.

Michael: And I'll tell you the other surprising thing about vulnerability. We talked about how when you are more vulnerable in life in general and in your relationships, you build stronger connections. And the incredible part about that is that when you then allow yourself to be vulnerable, if there is something that doesn't go well, maybe there is somebody that judges you, maybe something doesn't go well, you've built up these incredibly strong connections that help you to kind of pick yourself back up and move forward. Right? So for me, as I have kind of beared my soul in a lot of these blog posts, right, and most of them have been really well received, but I knew that even when there was somebody out there on the internet saying something negative, that I had this kind of band of friends and family who were supporting me and the things that I were doing around me, so that when somebody came at me and all of these other people around me that when I was getting knocked down, they were helping me get back up again.

And I think that, that really is the strength in vulnerability is that when you allow yourself to be vulnerable, when you allow yourself to build these deeper connections, you get so much more out of life, but you get so much more out of your relationships and you get to be more of everything. Of exactly who you want to be. Right?

Arpita: Yeah. And I'll just offer that I would like to compete with having haters, right? Because when we have haters, that means we're putting stuff out there that maybe they have an issue with

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themselves about, right? Haters are fine. That means we're getting out there and we want people to hear the messages. I also just realized thinking about this, one of the areas with this vulnerability I think it shows up again with me with the anger is this, whenever I catch myself being in resistance, like with an employee or with a child or just another colleague, whenever I'm pushing, I feel like I'm pushing really hard against taking a minute to step back and just allowing compassion and just the flow of, Hey, let me be curious here. Why am I pushing so hard? How can I sit back for a minute and just be vulnerable and curious to see what's going on? Why am I reacting this way? That goes back to a little bit, we talked about the awareness too, but right, when I notice that I am really pushing hard for something, I'm, and I'm kind of at odds, just being intentional about taking a step back and saying what's going on? That is allowing vulnerability, right? Because we push, push, push to get our way or fight because we have to be right about something, I want you to take a minute when those, those instances happen and just be a little bit introspective as to why? What am I afraid of here? What's, the danger that my brain is seeking, that I'm trying to protect myself from?

Michael: Yeah, that's a, a huge key there is what am I afraid of? Right? Because that's where the vulnerability holds us back. Right. And I think, you know, for men and for male and for physicians in general, right? There is a lot that is kind of underlying there that we are supposed to be stoic and not have these emotions and these feelings and all of this stuff come up for us. We're just supposed to kind of push it down and move on from it. And I think that question is, what am I afraid of? What will happen if I allow myself to be vulnerable in this instance? What am I afraid is gonna happen?

Arpita: Answer that question, Michael Hersh.

Michael: Well, you know, I think for me my big fear was just judgment. I think I had spent so much time worried about what everybody else thought that I had lost sight of what I thought. And I think as I learned to allow myself to be vulnerable, to allow myself to be seen, I got to start figuring out what I really liked, what I wanted and what I wanted my life to look like. And I wouldn't change a thing.

Arpita: We're all human, right? We are perfectly imperfect. We are unique for what we bring, and I think part of it is as we get older, we start to get a little bit more comfortable with that idea, that whole concept. And when we're younger, I mean, I do, I remember worrying about what other people think. And honestly, the beauty of who we are comes from the fact that we each have our own strengths and weaknesses and our own ways of putting things together and presenting it to the world and just being ourselves. And that's what really matters and that's what you should feel so proud of for your own sake and have that full love of yourself, for your own sake, for how you're showing up. Because you're gonna touch somebody in your life one way or the other for just you being who you are and showing up as you do so.

Michael: Well, this is why I love talking about vulnerability because I think it brings so much up and it opens up a whole new world for so many people. And so I'm so glad we got a chance to talk about

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this

Arpita: today. I think you brought up so many good points especially with regards to the males not feeling comfortable about what's the facade I have to put on for everybody? Right? And I think you could speak just openly and candidly and so, be a testament to what happens as a male, as a male physician in a, you know, a very powerful subspecialty world. How much it's changed your life by being able to make that change and how many more connections and just how much more comfortable you are in your own skin. Right?

Michael: Yeah. I mean, I think the community that I have created in my life, over, you know, the last couple of years is a testament to vulnerability and honestly, you know, and this is a conversation that you and I have had that community is, you know, is so important for overcoming physician burnout, for mitigating trauma, for just overall wellbeing. Community is so important and community. With vulnerability. I have so many, you know, I, I coach a lot of male physicians and a lot of times male physicians are trying to figure out like, how do I make friends, right? Like, how do I expand my friendship network? And this is where it starts, right? It starts by reaching out. It starts by allowing yourself to be vulnerable. This is the basis for everything.

Arpita: I can't say it any better than that. A hundred percent. So, well, I have really enjoyed talking to you. I feel like just emotionally like, connected even with this, but it's just been, it's been good. I mean, realistically, it's so nice to talk about it. It's so nice to talk about it with a guy, quite frankly. Right? So I appreciate you being open and honest and sharing your perspective. And I, and I am sure a lot of people are gonna really benefit after hearing what you had to say. Thank you.

Michael: Absolutely. Super fun as always chatting with you and looking forward to the next episode.

Arpita: Awesome. Yes. We'll see you soon.

Michael: Take care. Bye

Arpita: Bye.