

The Problem with Hiding

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I've always been great at hiding. Yes, I was phenomenal at hide and seek as a child, but I'm not talking about a game. I mean hiding myself – who I am, what I'm feeling.

I'm so good at hiding I can even hide from myself, shoving emotions and struggles down so deep I can't feel them anymore. More importantly, no one could see them anymore. I never *really* shared who I was because I feared others would reject me; I was afraid I would reject myself.

The problem with hiding is you'll always be found. You can try to run and change hiding spots, but it's just inevitable. Sometimes you're hiding so much that there isn't anything big enough to hide behind. And that's when you break.

I broke sophomore year of college.

On paper, my life appeared exactly how I wanted to the outside world: perfect. I had a full scholarship to college, a leadership position in my sorority, a long-distance but long-term relationship, among many other incredible things. I was finally feeling the love and validation I had never been able to give myself. My dreams were coming true.

The problem is, reality isn't on paper, it is what's written on the wall and what's hiding behind the wall, and my reality was ugly. My reality was convincing myself that my relationship wasn't toxic. My reality was feeling like I would never be loved by anyone else but him. My reality was feeling like I should blame myself for every little relationship blunder. I had become so good at hiding, I hid the truth from everyone, including myself, for his benefit and at my expense. My reality came crashing down when he broke up with me. I was lost, unrecognizable to myself. The lies I worked so hard to convince myself of were all I had left of him. I clung to them.

As I write this, it is so painfully obvious how misguided it was for me to hide. For over 10 years, I practiced self-loathing and deception. I had unstable relationships, my mind was always racing, and I had sporadic suicidal thoughts. If a friend complimented me, I didn't believe them. They didn't know the ugly, hidden parts. It wasn't normal, it wasn't healthy, and I eventually discovered it was Borderline Personality Disorder.

I was unaware of this until I was a little over twenty years old. Unable to regain footing in my life after hiding for so long, I felt like I was constantly standing in the ashes of my life. After encouragement from two of my closest friends, and a serendipitous presentation about a mental health program sponsored by my sorority, I found myself finally spilling the truth to a therapist. I felt something I hadn't ever felt before: relief. Every time I walked out of that office I felt lighter, like maybe I didn't have to hide anymore.

I started small, telling my mom. It felt good. I started to tell others, too. Instead of being met

with the judgment and rejection I expected, I was met with love, empathy, and in many cases shared experience. I knew I couldn't go back to a life of hiding, so I did the opposite and thrust myself into the light. I told my sorority I would do a presentation on the benefits of our mental health program. To this day, it's the scariest thing I've ever done. I was nauseous, shaking, and on the verge of tears. I almost didn't go through with it, but convinced myself I had to *finally* do something for me.

I divulged my story in front of my 120 sisters. I told them about the suicidal thoughts, the relationship problems, the Borderline Personality Disorder. For the first time in my life, I was vulnerable. And they clapped for me. They told me I was incredible, powerful, and brave.

For the first time in my life, I believed I was. I'll never hide again.

As a result of this experience, I made a personal goal to help others embrace their most authentic selves, which starts with vulnerability and honesty. I have found these characteristics are vital for being a quality human, student, and leader.

Being able to lead beyond the title means inspiring others to buy into your goals and vision. One of the most effective ways of gaining buy-in is through vulnerability and shared experience. People want to follow remarkable, powerful, and brave leaders, but they also want to follow people they can relate to on a personal level. By following these leaders, they realize they too can be remarkable, powerful, and brave—by being themselves!

Vulnerability needs to be a priority and focus of leadership. We can't just tell someone to be vulnerable and expect it in return. I've found the easiest way to enable vulnerability and authenticity in others is to demonstrate it yourself first. This unconsciously gives others permission to do the same.

While vulnerability is best facilitated through fostering personal relationships, we can also provide opportunities for this through activities, seminars, and discussions. Authenticity strengthens teambuilding, allowing individuals to bond through their goals and on a personal level. As leaders, we can't meet people where they are, or help them, without truly understanding their needs, which we can only tap into by enabling and supporting them to be authentic and vulnerable.

These actions create a culture of genuine leadership within our organizations and allow our needs to be satisfied as individuals, and as a community. It is the only kind of environment that could have helped me stop hiding, and the only environment that will produce the leaders our fraternities and sororities need.