



Episode 45: A Conversation on Vulnerability with Ashley Marie Eckstein, LMFT-A

Liz Higgins (00:02):

Hey y'all! Liz Higgins here... And welcome to the Millennial Life Podcast, where my main goal is to share conversations that will inspire you and drive you toward the life and relationship you desire. I'm here to share what I've learned as a licensed therapist and relationship coach, specializing in millennial relationships and wellness, as well as transformative conversations with other professionals. Thanks for listening, and enjoy today's episode!

New Speaker (00:33):

Hello everybody! I am incredibly excited to bring you today's episode because it has been a hot minute. And I'm sure a lot of you that have listened and followed along with this podcast have probably wondered "Where the heck did this thing go?" And we are back! So, I'm excited to be here and to be having this conversation today. And I'm even more excited for who I will be talking to today! I have a Millennial Life Counseling therapist, Ashley Marie, with me today. Welcome to the podcast, Ashley Marie!

Ashley Marie Eckstein (01:11):

Thank you so much, Liz! I'm really excited to be here.

Liz Higgins (01:15):

I am too! And for the listeners, Ashley Marie is a licensed marriage and family therapist associate. She's a trained premarital counselor. She's an Enneagram eight with a nine wing, so interesting <laugh>. And, she's currently training for a full marathon in a few months! And we were talking about some ways to introduce you, and describe you... And one of the things you also mentioned is you're an ocean lover. And just in getting to know you, I'm like, 'This makes so much sense.' There's so many fascinating things about you - just as a human! I'm continuously surprised by the things you're doing, and the things you're interested in, and, just learning more about you. So I'm super excited to be talking with you today!

Ashley Marie Eckstein (02:03):

Thank you so much, Liz. You're so kind. I'm just so honored to be here today!

Liz Higgins (02:09):

Well, the honor is all mine. So, we're talking about something really relevant today... vulnerability. And I think that vulnerability as a term, as a process, as an experience, it's really gained a lot of, a lot of popularity, a lot of traction, especially in our industry as therapists. And I thought we could just begin by talking a little bit about that. Why do you think that is? And what has drawn you to learning more about vulnerability?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (02:42):

Oh gosh. What a great question! You know, so many of us have heard of Brene Brown and her research on shame and vulnerability. And, and my journey with vulnerability actually started before I knew who Brene Brown was. And when I was introduced to Brene Brown <laugh>, metaphorically, I so wish I had met her in person. That would be amazing.

Liz Higgins (03:02):

Right?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (03:02):

<laugh>, Shout out to Brene! If you're listening, I love you. You're my favorite. But, she named something that we experience as humans that's just so curious, because it is... Vulnerability is so incredibly terrifying. It's, it can be painful because it's so scary. But if you lean into that vulnerability, the change that comes about is so incredible. And for those of us that have leaned into that, and then you hear Brene give a name to it, it's just like... You all of a sudden understand this is that thing I experienced in a new way.

Liz Higgins (03:37):

Yes. I love the way you said that because I, I think that's very accurate. Um, for me too, like... Reading her work and getting introduced to *The Gifts of Imperfection* so many years ago was the first time I was like "Oh my gosh. There's, like, language around this very prevalent human experience that many of us have. All of us have. And that certainly in our field we work in, day in and day out we are sitting in with clients. So, to be able to articulate that in a way that really anybody can now understand was really meaningful for me. And that's awesome to hear that you were really moved by her work and that that really fit in for you with the personal experiences you had.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (04:21):

Absolutely.

Liz Higgins (04:23):

So how did your journey with vulnerability start?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (04:29):

I, to this day, have a real love/hate relationship with vulnerability, if I'm honest, <laugh>. So back in 2016, I gave birth to my second child and I decided that, you know, two months later would be a good time to start graduate school. But I thought, you know, I'll be smart. I'm gonna take it slow and I'm only gonna take a few classes. 'Cause, you know, motherhood isn't hard enough without taking graduate level classes. After being outta the academic world for, like, a decade as I had been <laugh>.

Liz Higgins (04:58):

I'm just gonna sit back and, and chuckle silently to that.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (05:01):

<laugh>. Yes. Any mother out there is relating to that right now. <laugh>. You see, the thing is though, my son... He did not sleep more than three consecutive hours the first year of his life. Which meant I wasn't sleeping and I was just kind of a zombie through my first year of grad school. So I didn't really bother trying to make friends at all. But I made it through the first year and then came the summer from hell. In the summer of 2017, my mom's cancer came back with a vengeance. And two days before she went on hospice, I personally was diagnosed with cancer myself. So in the midst of all of this, did I decide to pause grad school and take care of myself and reset? No. I figured I, I just wasn't stressed out enough, you know? So I should start going to grad school full-time. <Laugh>.

Liz Higgins (05:56):

Okay. I'm gonna imagine that was not actually a conscious decision there. But do you think... Do you feel like that was maybe the fight or flight in you? Lean in even harder?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (06:09):

Oh, that is such a great question. Yes. When it comes to fight or flight, I am often a fighter. In my family and friend group, I'm often seen as the strong one and the rock, which makes vulnerability even harder for me. Because it's like, there's this expectation that I'm gonna be the strong one, you know? So yeah, I think it was just "Well, I'll be damned if I'm gonna let something hold me back. I'm just gonna go on through." So I just kept moving.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (06:39):

So yeah, I mean, I'll, I'll never forget though, my first day back in class, I was sitting in Normal Human Growth with Dr. Andi Thacker. If you're listening, Andi, I love you. And she started class by asking us to go around the room and share the best thing that happened about our summer.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (06:58):

Such a typical teacher thing to do, you know. Build rapport. But for me, I immediately started to panic. I'm generally a pretty positive person. You know that about me, Liz. But you see, that summer I was told 'You have cancer and we don't know how far it has spread yet.' And less than 24 hours after I gave the eulogy at my mom's funeral, I underwent a double mastectomy. Which, even after having two children, that was the most physically painful thing I've ever experienced. So I didn't exactly have a sweet story to share about my summer vacation with my family. So when it was my turn, I could feel the knot in my chest. It was tightening, even though I had never met this professor before. I blurted out... So this is that fight or flight you just mentioned, Liz. I blurted out and I pointed at her.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (07:57):

I actually pointed at her! "First of all, I'm mad at you for asking that question <laugh>. That's the Enneagram eight showing up there. But then after that, I proceeded to just totally word vomit all over my classmates about how hard the summer had actually been. And when I finished, the whole room was just silent for what felt like eternity. So immediately I feared 'I've overshared, my classmates are gonna think of me as weak now because I was tearing up.' Or maybe I'd be seen as the weird person in class. But you know, Liz, something totally different happened. My

professor, Andi, she actually emailed me later that day and thanked me for my vulnerability. And she told me that I had set the tone for the rest of the semester. Which kind of perplexed me at the time. I, I didn't really understand what she meant.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (08:51):

I didn't know what she meant by that. But then, one by one, several of the classmates of mine who I was, like, a decade their senior, they started to seek me out. And they told me that they could never be so vulnerable in front of a large classroom of strangers. So they saw, what I thought of as weakness, as courage. And as a result, as a direct result, they wanted to get to know me. So suddenly I went from being just totally isolated in my program to creating actual relationships with people that I still care about today. And this was the real beginning of my journey to understand what vulnerability could mean in my life. And the power that I've really found it holds for the couples I work with in the therapy room. I mean, don't get me wrong, I still absolutely hate being vulnerable, but I do fight hard for vulnerability because I love the reward. And ultimately that reward is connection.

Liz Higgins (09:51):

Wow. So I'm kind of just taking all that in, you know. I know parts of your story, but to hear you share it again with me, it's just reflective and mindful of the hugeness of these pivotal experiences you just shared about. And I'm kind of having two reflections. One is this piece you just shared - that people were ultimately actually drawn to you because of the way you actively like, honored what was true for you. Which is like, 'This is... This has been not great at all for me.' And could give voice to that. And though you walked away after that feeling, maybe your otherness in that whole thing, it actually pulled people to you, which is... I don't know. I'm just kind of sitting on that because I think you're absolutely right. That's, that's the essence of the gift of vulnerability is the connection that we can get. And I'm just, I'm thinking, too, about how, timeline-wise, that was in the midst of your diagnosis. Following the loss of your mom. And you still took that risk, that step. So it just makes me think, like, there's no wrong time to be vulnerable.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (11:25):

That day that I, in the classroom, that story I just shared... That day was five weeks to the day after I had a double mastectomy.

Liz Higgins (11:34):

Wow.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (11:35):

I remember looking at my surgery date and looking at the first day of school on the syllabus and going, 'Ok, I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna do this.'

Liz Higgins (11:44):

Wow. Can I ask a question about something you said a few moments ago? I feel like you said, "Sometimes I still hate being vulnerable." Hate's a strong word. Why do you hate it sometimes?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (12:02):

Oh <laugh>. And I shouldn't have used that word. 'Cause I tell my kids that we hate three things. We hate sin, Satan, and cancer in our family. <laugh> Yes. <laugh>. So I, I probably

don't hate being vulnerable. But I do really, really, really like to run away from it. <laugh>. It's just so hard to be raw. It's so hard to show people your weaknesses. And, you know, I very much see myself as this strong, powerful force of nature because I've been told as much by many people, right? I've been told that I come off that way <laugh>. For those of you that don't know me, I'm all of 5'1". Like, I don't hit more than 5'1" unless I'm wearing heels. But people tell me that they're intimidated by me. And I'm like, 'How are you intimidated by me?'

Liz Higgins (12:56):

It's, I mean, you know, it's, it's your strength. You are, yeah! You are a force, right? In every, in every best sense of the word is my opinion.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (13:06):

I love that. I love that. And, I like being this force of nature. And if I'm vulnerable, then on some level... And you know, I know this isn't true, but on some level I still feel if I show people those softer sides of me, they won't still view me as the strong force of nature anymore. And I think that's why I don't like vulnerability, because I like to be the force of nature. <laugh>.

Liz Higgins (13:32):

Yeah. But you know what you just did there? And I'm like, oh my gosh. So many people listening probably relate so deeply to what you just said. Men and women, right? Because you're describing the essence of how we are as people, you know? We have different parts of ourselves. And I don't know about you, but I certainly, when you get deep into the trenches with clients, have heard that from many strong people, right? That they have to be the strong ones, the tough ones, the providers, or whatever it might be in their story. Like, to display that vulnerability feels completely out of alignment with who they've worked so hard to be, right?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (14:19):

Yeah. Yes, one hundred percent, Liz. And I think that's why I use the word fight. I fight so hard for vulnerability because it doesn't come easily to me. I have to really fight for it. But ultimately, I know what that reward is at the end. That reward is connection. And that's why I continue to fight for it. 'Cause if left to my own devices, I'm never gonna be vulnerable with anybody. <laugh> I'm just gonna continue to be this amazing, strong force of nature. But I know that's not what's best for me. And it's not what's best for relationships. So I fight for it.

Liz Higgins (14:56):

Well, you're doing more than fighting for it. It's like you're, you're teaching others, right? To be in this industry we're in, in this role as a therapist. What a gift. What a gift! So, do you see vulnerability as telling people your life? Like, especially for more extroverted people, talking about yourself isn't always that hard. Most people love to talk about themselves. So what's the difference?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (15:28):

I love that you asked that question. And I, I've talked about this with some of my clients before too. So there's a difference between transparency and vulnerability. I read this somewhere, so I can't take credit for it, but I read a lot. So I'm not really sure how much of this is stolen and what is my addition to the idea. But transparency is telling the truth. I mean, it can be hard at times, but generally it isn't that risky to tell the truth. (As long as you're willing to take responsibility for your actions.) Vulnerability is different. It's risky. Vulnerability is opening up parts of you and

sharing what's deep inside. Sharing in a way that you could be further wounded. You know, I sometimes tell my couples about the difference between transparency and vulnerably, just to let them know that I understand how risky it feels to be vulnerable, especially with your partner. I mean, if you think about it, being wounded by a stranger hurts, but it's nothing compared to the pain that we feel when we're rejected by the person that we love most. And the more we value the relationship, the more painful that lack of connection with that person feels. Right?

Liz Higgins (16:42):

Oh! I just have to pause on that, like, that last thing you just said. Can you say that again?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (16:48):

Oh gosh. You know, the more we value the relationship, the more painful that lack of connection with that person feels. So, a lot of times in the therapy room, I'll highlight that with my couples. Like, 'This feels so scary and it's so hard. But that's because this person means so much more to you.' You know, maybe you had a relationship with a parent, you know. That you cut them off because of the way they treated you, and now your partner is treating you that same way that a parent treated you, but you're not cutting them off. You're leaning in. It's scary and it's hard, but you're leaning in because that relationship means so much to you.

Liz Higgins (17:30):

Right. Oof. That, that's huge.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (17:34):

So, I mean, this is where a lot of my couples are. When they come to see me for the first time, one or both of them, they feel wounded. And it's just too scary to tell their partner what that deep wound means. So I, I feel so privileged. I mean, Liz, I tell you all the time how grateful I am to be here at MLC and do this job because I get to help them unpack what they're afraid of in a way that allows their partner to see that vulnerability. And, you know, in my experience... What Brene Brown says, vulnerability breeds vulnerability. It's just absolutely true.

Liz Higgins (18:09):

Yes.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (18:09):

So if I can, if I can help one person go first, it usually softens their partner. And the other person's able to see that they're either pursuing or withdrawing out of a place for reaching for connection, or trying to protect the relationship. And that's where the magic happens. Because deep down, that's what we all want, right? Connection.

Liz Higgins (18:31):

Absolutely. And I would go as far as to say, you know, deepening in my own training with the, the woundings that we can somehow move through childhood receiving, that we work with some adults that are just so detached from even that awareness of like, 'I deserve connection, I want connection.' You know what I mean? And, um, everything you're saying though, I'm like, 'Oh, this is, it's all so true. This is, this is what we are inherently worthy of is good, healthy connection.' And there's a lot of things sometimes that get in the way, but I really do believe we are wired, we're created for connection.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (19:12):

Mm-hmm. And I mean, there's actually studies there that show, if you don't have human connection, human contact... If you're not touched, you'll die. That's just incredible to me.

Liz Higgins (19:30):

Absolutely. So you've really highlighted some helpful, really helpful differentiations here of like, the difference between transparency, (like honesty) and, and telling your truth. And like the, the true risk that goes into vulnerability as this relational move we make to be closer and connected. And it doesn't come without its risks, because you're right. Like, it may not be received, it may not be, you know, held in the way that we hope or need. So there's absolutely risk there. So if vulnerability is so risky, how do you go first?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (20:10):

Oh, well, well, <laugh>... In my personal life, I've learned to lean really hard into the honest but difficult conversations. And, you know, it's just so hard to admit when you've messed up. But I constantly try to remind myself, I want to be the kind of person who fills in the blank. You know, this can be, I wanna be the kind of person that takes responsibility for my mistakes, or I want to be the kind of person that's willing to apologize first if that protects the relationship. And when I frame it that way... It reminds me of my old cross-country coach. She used to tell me that crossing the finish line and being the fastest runner wasn't nearly as important as having integrity and being a woman of character. So I find that, when you remember who you want to be, who you are deep inside, then you can find the courage to lean into these hard conversations. You know, I think about that Disney movie, Moana <laugh>. And I'm not gonna sing for you right now, but that's definitely playing in the back of my mind, <laugh>. And so I, I think about, you know, who do you wanna be? But you can't teach motivation. But, I do like to believe I can empower my clients and help them define that courage within, to lean into vulnerability. And that often looks like hard conversations about your own relational fears, but the payoff of connection, it becomes worth the risk.

Liz Higgins (21:40):

Oh my gosh. I just wanna, like, you know... People can't see us when we're having this conversation, but I'm like, I'm really wanting to do this happy dance thing, <laugh>. 'Cause I'm like, yes. You know, and it's sure I'm biased I guess, but again, to be a therapist, (for me) it almost feels like you get let in on these like, secrets of life, and relationship, and humanity that, like, everybody should be pulled into and know. And there's so many good resources out there, you know? But like you said, it's such a privilege to be a therapist. It's, it's a privilege for me to like, have the ability to sit and hear you talk about this journey and these facts, these truths around something everybody, every single person has access to inside of themselves. Right? If they maybe can find the courage or, or have the support to learn to do this, you can. And I just love that you're somebody that is self-described, you know, tough. You're a fighter, you know? Like you're a strong person. I, I don't think I'd want to get into an argument with you <laugh>.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (22:51):

Yeah. You don't wanna <laugh>.

Liz Higgins (22:53):

But that you've leaned in so much to this, to this dance of welcoming vulnerability into your life. And I can only imagine too, you sharing that you have kiddos, how this impacts your parenting. I mean, we could probably do a whole other episode on that whole thing.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (23:10):

Mm-hmm. So in, in our household, we're really big on asking for forgiveness. And um, Andi Thacker, that professor I referenced earlier, she's the one that taught me it's important to close the loop in parenting with kids. And so, I mess up just like any other parent. I blow it. But when I do blow it, I own it. And so there's that vulnerability showing my kids I'm not perfect. And I ask them for forgiveness. And you know, at the time that we're recording this podcast, my kids are six and a half and nine. But we've been practicing this art of forgiveness, if you will, for many, many years. And let me tell you, it is humbling to ask a three-year-old for forgiveness when you've asked them to put their shoes on 32 times and then you raise your voice and yell. And to be able to go, 'I'm still the grownup. I should have stayed regulated. And it was not okay for me to yell at you. Will you forgive me for yelling at you? That was wrong for mommy to yell at you.' To ask that of a three-year-old, man, that's humbling. <laugh>.

Liz Higgins (24:09):

Yes. Oh my gosh. But what an incredible example. And I mean, like, I just translate exactly what you just said on closing the loop. That whole kind of process to a grown adult partnership, same sort of thing. And just sort of putting this on myself, it's like that feeling in my body. It's so much easier to just pull away after a disagreement or something that's happened. To just pull away, and withdraw, and shut the door, and not talk for a couple hours, and just come back out when I feel ready and pretend like it's gone. Even though both of you know it's not. Vulnerability is shifting into that part of me that's like, 'No, I'm gonna go out there and I'm gonna like, own my part of what just happened. I'm gonna talk about what just happened. I'm gonna request, you know, if I need something.' Like, to wade into that space where you're kind of shifting into this higher self that wants to be relational, that is vulnerability. That's it.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (25:16):

One hundred percent. One hundred percent. Yeah. I tell my clients often that even in the healthiest relationships, we're not just jumping from mountaintop to mountaintop. There are peaks and valleys. But the relationship masters, (that's a term from Gottman) they're the ones that repair. They recover from the fights, from the disagreements. And from the EFT frame, the lens that I work in, it's all about connection and building emotional security. And so when you build that connection and emotional security, which only comes if you risk being vulnerable, then you can repair. You can close that loop more readily. And better after you fight.

Liz Higgins (25:56):

Absolutely. So what about those situations where it feels unsafe to be vulnerable?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (26:04):

Ooh. So, for some of our clients, maybe they've never experienced that secure relational connection before. So the idea of leaning into this hard thing that I'm calling vulnerability, it might just feel impossible. That's when we go extra, extra slow. Now, if it's a situation where abuse is at play, that's another story. We have to call out abuse is not allowed in session in order to promote emotional safety in the therapy room. But as long as there are no

contraindications, I really work to be patient and remember there's just so much that I don't know about my clients. I mean, there may be times when I feel like maybe we haven't made much progress in this session, but if that's what the client needs, if they need more time to feel ready to go deep, then I'm here for that. I know what it feels like when someone tries to tell you how to change and how different it feels when someone empowers you to find your own courage to change. And personally, I much prefer the latter <laugh>. And that's what I hope to give my clients.

Liz Higgins (27:09):

Yes. That's, that's a huge one right there, because it's like that whole thing - don't tell somebody that needs to calm down to calm down. Like, they won't <laugh>. Don't tell somebody that needs to be vulnerable, "Can you just be vulnerable right now?" <laugh> Like, they'll just wall themselves off even more. That's where like, I just feel so, so passionate about finding a real, truly trained therapist if people are on the market trying to find somebody to help their relationship or help them learn to do this. To find someone that really is versed - like you are! Because unfortunately, we've heard so many stories of people that have tried therapists or other routes of like, healing their connection or improving their partnerships, that honestly it just does more damage. Because you, you have to be the way you're describing, like, we're not the expert of our clients. They are. We might be expert in certain skills or practices that we can help teach them, but, but it's their job to weave it into their story and figure out who they need to become, kind of like you're saying. I'm wondering, like, as we wrap up this conversation today, if there's somebody listening that is just really moved by this conversation and feels like, 'Oh my gosh, where do I even begin?' Like, what would you say to them if they're curious about working on vulnerability in themselves and in their relationship?

Ashley Marie Eckstein (28:42):

What a great question, Liz! So if that's you and you're listening, I'm gonna ask you if you're able to stop what you're doing right now. 'Cause I know so many of us multitask. I listen to podcasts while I'm, you know, gardening or driving... All those other things. If you're listening, stop. Stop what you're doing and take a moment. Take a really deep breath in. Let it out. And you know, I have seven and a half years of experience being a yoga instructor in a studio, so that definitely influences me. But I, I'm asking you to take that deep breath because you have to start really slow. And maybe you just need to take a really deep breath, fully take it in and fully let it out. Don't clench your stomach, don't hold it in. But let that breath out. And as you let that breath out, just paying attention to the sensations in your body.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (29:41):

See what's coming up. If you, as you think about, just thinking about the idea of being vulnerable, does fear come up? What is it that you might be afraid of? Just pay attention to yourself. Because you have so much inside of you that you might not be paying attention to. And you can do this! You can open up and be vulnerable, but it feels scary and I know that. And so I would really encourage you to find someone that will hold your hand through this process and remind you that baby steps are still steps forward.

Liz Higgins (30:19):

Oh, that's big. Yes. Thank you for that. And you better believe I was kind of doing that in myself as you were, as you were leading that process. And it's really interesting, like, you know... Honoring the fact that I've been a therapist for about over a decade now, and I've really thrown myself into practices that are healthy. Like what really came up for me when I was thinking

about vulnerability in my life was peace. Like, it's this anchor. Where 10 years ago, 15 years ago, I would not have said that. I would've been like, maybe get me away from that. But really in my life today, it's, it's like essential, you know? Because I know that it, I know, I believe, and I, I have seen with clients now that I've been able to walk with, right? That to develop this practice and learn to be more vulnerable really brings a lot of gifts to your life.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (31:20):

One hundred percent. Yes.

Liz Higgins (31:22):

Thank you so much for joining me and for sharing these insights on vulnerability. This has really gone very well. I'm like, this is so exciting! I hope so many people listen to this 'cause I know we need more of this in our world, that's for sure.

Ashley Marie Eckstein (31:37):

Thank you, Liz. It's truly my pleasure. And really, I, I believe in this so much. As hard as it is to live it out, I really believe that it works. And I wouldn't preach about it if I didn't believe it myself. <laugh>.

Liz Higgins (31:53):

I know, right? And you're, you're really a rockstar working with so many clients right now. So for anybody listening that is curious about Ashley Marie and wants to hear a little more from her, learn about working with her, just head over to our website and look at her bio page because she is amazing. Thank you again!

Ashley Marie Eckstein (32:14):

Thank you, Liz!

Liz Higgins (32:17):

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