

Online Vulnerability Workshop

Matt Joseph Diaz

Headcount: 29

Welcome from Matt, excited to be here, first time as both a presenter and participant.

“On Vulnerability and Being the Representation You Want to See” This workshop is for your personal benefit, is a safe space to be yourself.

This is a safe space where you can express yourself freely and openly. We're going to be having some discussions today about vulnerability and about personal boundaries. And with that, things can get kind of heavy. So I invite you to participate to the extent that you're comfortable with, and be sure to access participant support that we have here at the Summit if you need it.

What is Mindful Vulnerability? We're going to get into that in a minute.

Vulnerability and boundaries. How are vulnerability and representation intertwined? What representation would your younger self need to see?

I kind of wanted to take a minute just to make sure you knew why I'm here and why I am passionate about discussing this for my workshop. So, Matt Joseph Diaz, they/them, is a 27-year-old non-binary Puerto Rican writer, public speaker and social media activist. I tend to focus primarily on radical body positivity, gender and sexual identity and the power of mindful vulnerability. My career began back in 2015 after I went viral for rehealing excess skin after extreme weight loss.

I don't want to get into the weight loss discussion, obviously, because -- surprise-surprise! -- my opinions about weight have changed since my early 20s, but I would like to explain just about why I think this ties in so much with a topic I'm discussing here today. So when I was a teenager, I lost 300 pounds over the course of a couple years. And because of that, I was left with over 50 pounds of excess skin on my upper body. That filled me with a lot of shame. And I ended up keeping it a secret from pretty much everybody for a long time. In 2015 I was on Tumblr of all places and got an anonymous question from one of my 300 followers that basically said, hey, I know you lost a bunch of weight, do you have any excess skin? Because I've been dealing with that and I've been feeling really embarrassed about it. And that question really stuck with me. And so the next day I ended up posting this video just for a couple hundred people where I talked about and showed the excess skin I had. It ended up being one of the most vulnerable moments of my life. I got into why I felt so much shame and what it was like keeping it from everybody for so long. And in the next couple of days, that video ended up getting shared up -- that video ended up getting shared all over Tumblr, ripped to YouTube, written about in BuzzFeed and Upworthy, and within the next week tens of millions of people had seen the most open and vulnerable moment of my young life. Which can be kind of a shock to the system, especially if you're not anticipating it. But surprisingly, the response that I got were people -- thousands upon thousands of people messaging me to tell me they were just happy to see that they weren't alone anymore. And it wasn't just people who also had excess skin. I got messages from trans people who were holding a lot of shame about the way that their bodies look. I got messages from people who had given birth who felt like they weren't comfortable in their skin because they had been pregnant. And in this I found power in being vulnerable. I had met so many people who had just been feeling so much pain and silence because they were embarrassed to talk to anyone, because they were worried they

would be ousted for how they looked. And that's what led me to coming to this place where I decided that being vulnerable online and being the representation that you want to see out in the world was something that was important to me.

So, what is mindful vulnerability? If you have never heard this term before, don't be surprised. Because I made it up.

MV: is the practice of allowing yourself to be vulnerable

1. Self-care must be the entry point into activism
2. Work to distinguish between feeling uncomfortable and feeling unsafe
3. Be gentle with yourself and all things!

Allow yourself kindness and the opportunity to grow.

We're all here because we want to listen and be listened to. Don't be too hard on yourself if you make a mistake.

Warm-Up!

What does vulnerability look like to you?

When was the last time you felt like you were openly vulnerable?

What do you feel is your biggest obstacle to being vulnerable?

Participant Responses:

When I'm vulnerable, it gives others the chance to be vulnerable, it gives more people permission to be themselves.

We're only as sick as our secrets, when I find safe, non-harmful ways to share it...shame is stupid

Vulnerability and representation:

How much power there is in being willing to put yourself out there

Why you shouldn't be terrified for IG to know your life isn't only beach shots and selfies

It is good to see people who look like you.

Vulnerability and sincerity are key to online representation

Though we want to present our best selves online, sanitizing our lived experiences can sometimes alienate those we're hoping to reach.

Was on a panel for body positivity, and was invited to a panel last minute. When there, realized all the other panelists were these conventionally attractive thin white women and I realized I was the diversity. I think that sometimes in movements, especially as they begin to be pulled more into the mainstream, larger powers tend to try and present these marginalized people as the most palatable version of what and who these people are. And this really showed me that I had to demand to be seen if I wanted to carve out a space for myself in any sort of community where I might not naturally fit in.

Representation is about demanding to be seen. Which is what I just said. Carving out a place for ourselves and those like us and normalizing that we exist and always have. I think we use terms like carving out a space because that is exactly how it can feel. On social media or out in the world, I feel like we have a duty to be our biggest boldest and truest selves. We have to refuse to be ignored, because that is the only way we can really thrive. The trans experience, at least for me, has been one where solidarity has been essential to our growth. And being open and honest about our struggles is an

important part of that. I don't think I'm speaking out of turn when I say "at the Trans Equity Summit, that it's important to form connections and be supportive of other people like you.

Every trans person who is willing to be vulnerable about their experience, especially people of color who are often under-represented normalize it for someone who might not feel safe opening up because they don't see themselves reflected in the world around them. I know as far as my own story goes, a really large part of why it took such a long time for me to be comfortable thinking of myself as non-binary is because as I started to look into what it meant to be gender non-conforming, I had to learn that non-binary people were allowed to look like me. And I think that's just kind of a result of underrepresentation in the culture.

And obviously that is changing with time, but it still is something that we have to be cognizant of. It isn't something that just changes with time because it changes. It's something we have to actively be involved in every step of way if we want to actually show the diversity that reflects how diverse this group actually is.

Even when breaking free of traditional ideas of gender, we can still feel caught up in a trap of what we're supposed to be or what we're supposed to look like. And having to push through that in order to learn who I truly was was definitely one of the hardest parts for me. I really do believe practicing mindful vulnerability can help to navigate the difficulties of being open online. And I really feel like the power of allowing yourself to be vulnerable and to forge those connections is what is going to be make the biggest change in our community.

What type of representation do you wish you had seen when you were younger? And this is not exclusive to the trans experience. I want you to think of the aspects of yourself that you could have discovered ages earlier had you just seen someone who looked like you. For an example, I am a Latinx person, and I grew up loving super heroes. And I have a young nephew -- I mean, he's like 15 now, but when he was incredibly young and I introduced him to comic books, the first time that we got to see Miles Morales, who is the half Black half Latinx Spider-Man, my nephew was so excited, because he got something I didn't get often in my childhood, which was to see a strong and powerful hero who looked a lot like him. And I think about that a lot. Because I feel like there are so many times where if we had just had examples of people who were revered and who were celebrated in culture that looked like us, then I think we would be -- we would feel the permission to discover a lot of important things about ourselves way earlier.

What type of representation do you wish you'd seen when you were younger?

Aging queer folx

Hard part is coming from myself, feel like I'm taking up space AFAB gender neutral person because a lot of time I present as femme; the more time I spend with others, I feel...

When I'm being loud, and queer, and happy I have to remind myself that maybe that is the representation someone younger than me needs to see

Validation feedback loop