

How not to be a superhero

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Since most of us are mere mortals who lack extraterrestrial powers, keeping up appearances may not always be possible or healthy.

Like many others, my days often start with a mental checklist of items I need to take out with me. Being the light traveller that I am, this often consists of office items (working on the go), wardrobe paraphernalia (a girl needs options), nursery stuff (kids need options) and some gardening equipment (don't ask!).

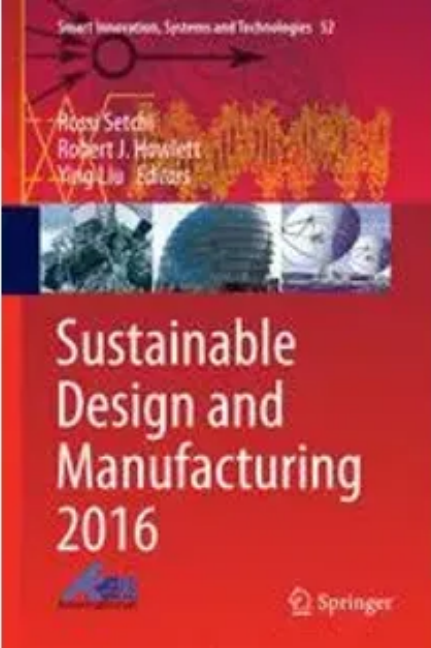
Of course, this results in venturing out of the house with a humungous pile of items topped by a wriggling kid or two as I attempt to cheerily salute my bemused neighbours. Lately, the national focus on road rage has prompted me to reflect on some kitchen item

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be eligible for inclusion in my daily clutter pack. Such as my rolling pin and a pan or two. Taf int, just in case I happen to have a cooking whim while out on a drive or, God forbid, fail to give way when I am supposed to do so. Self-defence, you see? Clever.

We have often attributed road rage to our lively temperament, dense traffic and inhumane summer temperatures. Lately, it seems as though we are gradually acknowledging that this may be snowballing into an increasingly worrying challenge that needs to be addressed. One can only be thankful that no one has yet attempted to introduce the US firearms legislation to Malta as otherwise we would all serve as each other's clay pigeons.

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As it has been previously pointed out, this rage is most likely also directly related to our hectic lifestyles, the pressing need to chase after time and ideally be at three places simultaneously. It is often a result of attempting to indulge in that which I am calling, the 'superhero existence'.

Namely, this is the need to feel as though you are juggling 30 balls at one go, totally in control and compromising with others – ideally while looking like a million dollars and emitting a zen-like aura. Since most of us are mere mortals who lack extraterrestrial powers, keeping up appearances may not always be possible or healthy.

It could be that driving provides an excellent opportunity to let our hair down and vent all the daily frustrations on those poor souls who dare cross our way. In the face of driving

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related adversity, some pray or swear in silence while others unleash their inner Neanderthal onto our streets, hence the lembuba (rolling pin) or the notorious iron rod. It can be said that this would be a moment of expression of vulnerability – of frankly showing what one is feeling, in a rather unhealthy way, of course. However, what if vulnerability could be expressed more regularly and in healthier ways?

“ It is about putting ourselves ‘out there as we are’ despite the fear of being trashed and ridiculed by others ”

Expert Brene Brown defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure – basically the opposite of nicely wrapped up classifications such as black or white, certain or definite and good or bad (Brown, 2019). It is about limiting perfectionism, suppressing the need to present ourselves as better than we actually think we are and admitting that at times we are scared, at a loss, fed up or needing help.

It is about putting ourselves ‘out there as we are’ despite the fear of being trashed and ridiculed by others. Vulnerability is the practice of telling it like it is, irrelevant of the reactions that this may provoke. It is the act of providing the world with authentic snippets of what makes us tick and what makes us sick.

Perhaps it is about doing away with the small fluffy talk about the weather just because we feel compelled to indulge in it, hence probably reducing half of the planet’s noise pollution and freeing up 15 minutes from most meetings.

In this view, vulnerability defies its common negative connotations to weakness. In truth it is actually anything but, for it takes courage and resilience to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability and just be, without trying to constantly prove one’s worth and please others (Fahkry, 2018). As Brown (2013) puts it: “The difficult thing is that vulnerability is the first thing I look for in you and the last thing I’m willing to show you. In you, it’s courage and daring. In me, it’s weakness.”

More often than not, perfectionism is frequently sold as the be-all and end-all of our existence. Not to be confused with the strive for self-improvement and doing one’s best, rigid attempts on oneself or others to be perfect may not be the best way to optimise mental health. This may apply to limiting praise, approval and affection to your kids only if they score straight As in exams, berating yourself for sending out an e-mail with a typo or

placing excessive importance on the need to appear and behave perfectly all around the clock.

Apart from the stress factor (and the pungent odour of boredom that perfectionism may be surrounded with), constant attempts at being the perfect human (whatever that is) or trying to be a superhero may feel like trudging around in a suit of armour. This allows one to be in full defence mode and to hide one's true self behind a shield. A sorry sight to say the least and a state that tends to hinder important experiences that are often characterised by uncertainty, such as love, meaningful connections, trust, happiness and creativity (Brene, 2013).

Embracing vulnerability does not equate to baring your bottom to the whole, wide world. Admittedly, basic decency still dictates the enforcement of a filtering system between one's thoughts and one's words and actions. Thus, while sharing some personal feelings is a yay, vomiting your emotions on to every unsuspecting victim is a definite nay. As is sadfishing.

Vulnerability is not (or rather should not be) a political tactic. Being vulnerable does not imply that one can insult others unnecessarily since a degree of diplomacy can still be exercised while doing away with keeping up appearances. Vulnerability is all about building stronger connections with one's authentic self and others (Akkerman, 2017).

Thus bulldozing one's way through life and continuously trampling on others would totally defy the scope. Still it has to be said that sometimes others' expectations may not be congruent with one's wishes and then so be it (we are not perfect, remember?).

Will this put an abrupt end to our road rage problem? Quite unlikely. Yet it may help some of us to diffuse anger and be less prone to temper outbursts. As pleasant as it may look, continuously running on a hamster wheel with sole focus on avoiding an epic mishap may not bode well for mental well-being. Perhaps then the act of freely acknowledging and exposing that which constitutes our kryptonite may indeed uncover talents and tranquillity beneath layers of pretence and defence. In Captain Marvel's words: "I have nothing to prove to you... what happens when I'm finally set free?"

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