

## Lindsey R. Kelley PharmD, MS

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### *Vulnerability Is Courageous*

If you have the pleasure of meeting Lindsey, you can sense her leadership presence through her confidence. The surprising key to Lindsey's confidence is actually through her vulnerability. Lindsey offers her advice to others about the importance of being authentic and open, and courageous in all that you do.

Lindsey is currently the Director of Ambulatory Pharmacy Services at Michigan Medicine, where she previously served as Assistant Director. She completed her BS in Chemistry (2001) at Northern Arizona University, her PharmD (2005) at University of Arizona, and her MS (2008) at University of Minnesota–Twin Cities.

***Lindsey's advice is: Choose the hard thing. Be uncomfortable. Be vulnerable. Be courageous.***

### *Dear Colleague,*

As I began to think about what advice I would impart to women pharmacists, I questioned whether I could identify anything worthwhile. I wondered aloud to my wife and colleagues: *Who am I to give advice? Do I have anything worth talking about?* And it was in asking those questions that an idea for this letter came to life.

Questioning ourselves is something we often do—we question our value, our ability to contribute, our worthiness. This has been a personal struggle for me at various times in my



life and career, and while I have not figured it all out, I want to share a bit about my journey in the hopes that it may provide insight for your own.

## Courage as Vulnerability

I come from a strong line of independent women—who learned to change their own tires and their own oil, raised families where crying served no purpose, and quitting was never an option. As a young person growing and watching these women—my mother, my aunts—I learned that where I am from, courage is defined as unflinching perseverance, a constant pursuit of perfection.

A few years ago, my family experienced an incredible tragedy; we lost my brother-in-law to early onset Alzheimer's. He was 37. As you might imagine, this was devastating to my sister and her four children, and our family came together to survive this pain. Over the years that followed, I spent more time than I ever had with my sister. We began to talk about this concept of courage. As we shared our experiences of feeling like our worth was tied to being the best leader or mother, we talked about where it began and wondered whether it still served the value it had when we were kids.

I don't recall how I fell into Brené Brown's work, but it was around this time. And by grace or serendipity, I read her book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*. In it, Brown ties the idea of courage or bravery to the concept of vulnerability, which she defines as "showing up and letting ourselves be seen." She goes on to say, "When we spend our lives waiting until we're perfect or bulletproof before we walk into the arena, we ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recoverable, we squander our precious time, and we turn our backs on our gifts, those unique contributions that only we can make."

## Courage as a Decision

*If courage is vulnerability and vulnerability is showing up and letting yourself be seen, then the decision to be courageous can start in small ways and at any time.* Over the course of your life and career, you will be presented with many opportunities to practice courage. From education, to residency training, to employment, to management and leadership, to building and raising a family (if that is something you choose), and beyond, you will have choices about whether or not to show up and let yourself be seen. *Do you choose to bring your whole self to your workplace? To your mentee or mentoring roles? To your professional organizations?* In my own personal and professional life, I have had many opportunities to choose to be courageous and vulnerable.

Some of the ways we choose to practice courage can be small. For example, I keep the tissues in my office sitting on my desk, in plain view. You might ask, “Why is that courageous?” As a learning manager I was taught that to avoid people crying in your office, one should simply hide the Kleenex. Almost every manager or leader I have worked with has had a box of tissues tucked away somewhere in a cabinet or cupboard, but never prominently displayed.

This strategy to avoid connecting made sense to me. I knew from my own personal experience as a young person that connecting to people could be risky. While attending Alateen, a program to support children living in families with an alcoholic, I learned that the behaviors of alcoholics were not in my control. This was a valuable lesson at this point in my life. However, I internalized this to mean that distancing myself from others offered emotionally protective value, that it was easier to make hard decisions when there was space between myself and others.

Using this tactic in my work life seemed to serve the same emotionally protective mechanism. For example, it allowed me to manage the pain of firing employees I knew to be good human beings when they weren’t meeting the expectations of their jobs. It allowed me to distance myself from responding with compassion to a person’s tears or sadness and focus solely on correcting employee behavior.

For many, tears are a natural response to stress or even happiness. In the moment when a person is crying, it is easy for the person crying to feel imperfect and to feel shame. It is easy for a person crying to think, “I need to get myself under control.” The last thing a person suffering or experiencing shame wants to do is ask for a tissue. A short time ago, not long after my introduction to the concept of vulnerability as courage, I removed the tissue box from the drawer where it had lived for years. I moved it out and displayed it prominently.

This is my simple and subtle attempt at encouraging vulnerability and honoring those who enter my office. It has become a conversation-starter to talk to others about this concept of vulnerability and what it truly means to be supportive, to demonstrate empathy, to say, “This space is a safe space. Cry as much as you want. Here are the tissues.” It also serves as a gesture to signal to those entering my office that if they cry, it is OK. This tactic is particularly powerful when I think about how committed I was to avoiding emotional engagement with the people I worked with and the power and strength I have found in connection.

## Courage as a Practice

*Courage is doing the hard thing.* And the hard thing changes over time. Every new opportunity comes with its own set of challenges and potential consequences. If we know that every environment and every decision has the capacity for courage, how can we prepare? Practice, practice, practice.

Think of the first thing you ever did that felt brave. What was it? Riding a scary rollercoaster? Learning how to drive? Choosing to attend college far from home? What does courage look like for you now? Selecting a residency? Caring for an aging parent? Looking for a new job? Parenting a child? What feels courageous may change over our lifetimes, but the need for courage never stops.

Over the course of my career, the hardest thing I have done is make the decision to live my life as an openly lesbian woman. I have lived my life since my mid-twenties committed to talking about my life the way anyone would talk about theirs. When someone asked about my weekend, I made small commitments, like not using vague pronouns and giving my partner's gender. My friends have always known and met people I was dating. Although the courage required to do this has evolved with each new city or job, I only ever shared as much as was necessary to feel normal in any situation. I only let people see as much of me as was necessary to manage my fear.

When I met my wife, she inspired me to speak more freely about being a lesbian, to move from passive acknowledgment to active rejoicing. And so, recently, I have. I share my story with students, with colleagues, and with mentees; I have even shared my story in a nationally published article recently. When I share, I talk about how hard it can be, how it feels like you'll never know when a friend or colleague will step away rather than lean in to learn more, but I also share the joy. The joy of finding bosses and mentors that support you, work environments that are diverse, and those friends and colleagues that celebrate with you. Although I have certainly had some responses encouraging me to share less broadly or to be more quiet about this part of who I am, I have been overwhelmingly encouraged by the responses of many others. I have found that there are many who have a loved one or a friend they want to support and they ask questions about how to do this.

For example, I was asked several years ago to speak to a colleague whose daughter was beginning to identify as gay. I was honored and terrified. I was not close with this colleague, and it was frightening to think of sharing so much of myself. It was also exciting to think that through this sharing of my story, I might impact the future of this mother-daughter relationship in a positive way. We set up an initial call where I shared my story, ideas about what parents can

do, and resources for her and her daughter. We connected a few more times. This moment where I showed up and let myself be seen came with great reward. My story helped a mother and her daughter tackle things together, and they have a strong relationship now.

Sometimes, I have found that sharing this part encourages others who have wondered or struggled with the same thing. Frequently, I find this response among students who find me after class or set appointments with me to share and ask questions. Increasingly, schools and colleges of pharmacy are initiating these conversations, inviting leaders to speak openly about what can be done to better honor our students and colleagues for who they are. In these moments, I never miss an opportunity to impart the joy of being honored for all of who you are and the value of honoring all of yourself.

As pharmacists, we will always be faced with tough decisions. Some will be personal, and some will impact patient care. There are moments when we disagree with those we respect because we know a better way. Moments when we know there is a better treatment, better therapy, or simply a better course. There are times when it is important that we speak out in groups, knowing we do not carry the opinion of the majority. Moments that demand a tough decision. ***We must show up and let ourselves be seen.***

Brené Brown would say “It’s a practice, not an attitude” and that “You can choose courage or you can choose comfort. You cannot choose both.” ***Choose the hard thing. Be imperfect. Be vulnerable. Be courageous.***

*Sincerely,*

*Lindsey*