

Effective Confession: How to Do It and Why

by Drew Boa

Brené Brown touched a nerve when her research on vulnerability and courage produced a best-selling book and elicited more than 21 million views of her [Ted Talk](#). Brené's work has helped people realize their need to be vulnerable and confess their inner brokenness, but the next question is: *How?*

You may have heard how an exercise of confession is necessary for emotional, spiritual, and social health. You may have experienced this exercise as incredibly difficult and demanding—which it is. But confession is more than a healthy habit or an emergency intervention; it is a lifelong skill. There is a difference between simply confessing and confessing *well*.

Effective confession is an important skill for teaching and learning. As teachers who are also learners, we all make mistakes that negatively affect others (and ourselves). We do not always honor our own principles, and we need to be honest about this with our learners. By bravely confessing our mistakes and flaws to learners, we create a new power dynamic by modeling vulnerability and opening the door to authentic community.

In what any area of your life do you need to be more vulnerable? Keep this in mind as you read the following tips for maximizing the power of confession:

Effective confession...

1. **...must be spoken aloud to another person.** While “confessing” inner brokenness to one’s self and even to God can yield some positive results, it still leaves the inner ugliness locked in the dark corridors of the heart. This ugliness must be seen by another person in order to be named, and proven to have no power to disqualify the speaker as unworthy of love. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear apart the community.”¹ Once the point of confession has been brought before another person, it can be dealt with. The darkness of self-deception dissipates. The speaker can finally face the situation, and change. Conclusion: Stop holding it inside. Tell someone.

To start the process of effective confession, ask:

- *Why is it so much harder to admit our ugliness to another person than to ourselves?*
- *When and how have you seen unconfessed sin “tear apart” a community?*
- *What inner brokenness or shame do you need to tell someone about?*

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, 110.

2. **...requires sound relationships and high safety.** Where you confess, and to whom, can definitively alter the confession event. Without a context of deep trust, confidentiality, unconditional favor and disciplined listening, confession can wound rather than heal. Only when the speaker feels safe and accepted will the “inner monsters” reveal themselves. For this reason, public confession in front of a group tends to be surface-level and behavior-focused. It can make both speakers and listeners feel inferior to others because of their failures, or else feel superior to others because of their success. Whether from one person to another or to a small group, a confession is a tender thing that needs to be nurtured in committed relationships. Conclusion: People will tell you if they trust you.

To ensure safety, ask:

- *What makes you feel safe enough to be truly vulnerable with another person?*
- *Who in your life would you feel safe confessing your own ugliness to?*
- *What steps can you take to help others feel safe?*

3. **...tells a story.** Every action or attitude confessed always belongs to a larger, more complex series of events. Listeners need to learn the stories surrounding whatever is confessed. Speakers do not usually want to burden listeners with seemingly irrelevant contextual information, but this can do them a disservice. In trying not to bore the listener, they can inadvertently rob themselves of an important part of the process. Granted, explaining the circumstances surrounding the point of confession does not exempt the speaker of responsibility, nor does it resolve all tension. Locating the inner brokenness within a bigger picture deepens self-awareness and enhances learning. Recounting related events also minimizes generality and maximizes specificity. The specific details of the story help to shed light on the emotional, spiritual, and social conditions of the situation. Conclusion: Look for connections between what you have done and what you have experienced.

To facilitate storytelling, ask:

- *What surrounding events in your life led up to this situation?*
- *What happened earlier in the week, earlier in the day, or in the moment?*
- *What connections can you make between the situation and your reaction?*

...reveals more than behavior. Effective confession moves beyond externalities. It sinks down to the heart-level, to the internal roots of visible actions and attitudes. This inner terrain can be difficult to navigate; some people will need more help than others to explore it. Certain dark, dank corners of the heart recoil from exposure. Such areas do not afford easy access. Conclusion: Search your heart and come face to face with *why* you did it.

In order to get beyond the outer layer of confession to the core, ask:

- *What fears may have driven my behavior?*
- *What may I have been trying to cope with?*
- *What (or whom) did I resort to in my time of need?*
- *What circumstance(s) might I have felt the need to control?*
- *What lies have I believed? What truth do I need to hear?*

...thrives on immediacy. The timing of a confession can make the difference between heartfelt disclosure and a lackluster report. It is much easier to talk about what *used* to hurt than what *still* hurts—and much less effective. Lessening distance between the speaker and whatever needs to be confessed counteracts emotional insulation and has a higher chance of really healing the raw wound. Confessing soon after (or even before) an incident not only enhances the confession itself, but prevents further destructive consequences. Insidious secrets can eat away at a person for years if left unspoken or unaddressed. Conclusion: Stop procrastinating. Confessing now might even save you from future loss.

To help the speed at which confessions are offered, ask:

- *When and how have you seen the timing of a confession affect its power?*
 - *Why do we tend to procrastinate confession? What happens when we put it off?*
 - *If you have something you know you need to confess, when will you do this?*
4. **...includes space and time to process.** Pay special attention to the “where” and “when” of a confession. Never rush it. While the priority of immediacy means not waiting to tell someone, the priority of space and time means finding an ideal environment to facilitate deep heart-sharing. This will vary, depending on the seriousness of the situation and any outlying external constraints. However, a particularly memorable place and time can determine the effectiveness of a confession even more than the relationship between speaker and listener. Conclusion: Secure a suitable place for the conversation.

In considering the best space and time, ask:

- *What do you see as the ideal environment for “deep heart-sharing” to take place?*
- *How have you seen the location of dialogue affect the level of vulnerability?*
- *What steps can you take to design and facilitate space for personal confession?*

...leads to a decision. Without this step, regular rhythms of confession devolve: either into “dumps” in which participants make themselves feel better about failing, or “check-ups” in which participants feel obligated to report their performance. This is why many confessional partnerships end up stagnating after a few weekly updates. Although

confessing inner brokenness is essential to growth, confession by itself does not transform. It remains incomplete without a choice to intentionally act in light of the truth. This may involve making a formal commitment. Even if the confession does not correspond to any wrong done by the speaker, newly disclosed information will surely have important implications. Now that someone else knows, the stakes have been raised. It may be that an elusive obstacle has come into view; do not hesitate to address it! It may be that a previously overlooked thought has been named; do not ignore it! **Conclusion:** Don't just make a confession; make a decision.

5. To complete the process of confession, ask:

- *How can I intentionally act in light of this?*
- *What tangible, doable steps can I commit to?*
- *What or who will help me evaluate my progress?*
- *How can others continue to support me moving forward?*

I am not aware of anyone who actually enjoys confessing their inner brokenness. But with practice, it can become an integral and life-giving way to break through loneliness and perfectionism to authentic community. Relationships heal and broken people flourish not just by confessing, but by confessing *well*.

Your invitation:

- *Which of these tips are most important for you?*
- *How might this sort of practice strengthen your facilitation of learning events?*
- *What is it that will allow you to personally confess, and confess well?*
- *In light of the axiom, "The means is dialogue, the end is learning, the purpose is peace,"² how does effective confession contribute to dialogue, learning, and peace?*

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² *On Teaching and Learning* by Jane Vella (2008), pp 214.

Effective confession...	Ineffective confession...
<p>...must be spoken to another person.</p> <p>...requires trust in a safe relationship.</p> <p>...tells a bigger story.</p> <p>...reveals desires, roots, and heart issues.</p> <p>...includes space and time to process.</p> <p>...thrives on immediacy.</p> <p>...leads to a decision.</p>	<p>...is not spoken aloud to anyone.</p> <p>...is forced out in an unsafe context.</p> <p>...focuses only on the moment itself.</p> <p>...focuses only on sinful behaviors.</p> <p>...is hurried or downplayed.</p> <p>...waits a few days to talk.</p> <p>...does not seek change.</p>