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Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own. "I know I'm just the proof-reader, but are you sure you want to use this word? It's really offensive." Richard Ross | Getty Images I wasn't exactly shocked. I was surprised the question hadn't come up in the three previous rounds of excruciatingly honest and painstakingly nuanced editing that my book manuscript had gone through.C*nt. That's the word we were talking about, by the way.Specifically the conversation addressing whether "C*nt: Why We Make Women the Enemy" was a good chapter name for the book I wrote in lockdown. I planned to use this book as a platform to build my fledgling, but alive and kicking, coaching and speaking business.Yes. My target audience was women.And, no. I wasn't using an asterisk. I am not easily talked down off creative ledges. I enjoy a bit of risk.But on that warm August afternoon, it had been almost a year to the day since I had seen a family member who wasn't my partner. I had cat hair on my sweatpants and a profit loss statement that showed I wasn't yet able to quit my full-time creative director job and pursue my passion full-time. So, when this proof-reader asked a pointed question that I had asked myself and shoved down a million times, it just caught me at the wrong moment. And it struck the fear of an unknown god into me.The proofreader raised a reality that extended far beyond single word choice: How big of a risk was building a business based on being honest about the kind of woman I used to be? The same kind of woman I see in every office I used to work in, every gym I used to lay down and die in, and every feed I still scroll?What kind of woman am I talking about?A woman who doesn't like other women.How honest is too honest?The process of writing my book was isolating in the best possible way. Last March, while the world and the majority of people living in it were freaking out, I felt eerily alive and creative. I crawled into a writing cave (the table in my kitchen) stopped reading anything to eliminate unwanted noise, and started writing for two hours every morning at 7am before work. The British edition of Love Island was my preferred white noise.I had a 53,000 word manuscript for my editor by late May.And I wasn't playing around. I took a spade to my soul. The subject matter was raw as hell. If you've ever written a book, shared a deeply personal truth about yourself (even if that truth is no longer reflective of who you are now), or got this close to launching a product or service that some part of "you" is embedded in, you might know the feeling that rose up in me when the proof-reader called my word choice into question.If someone somewhere could bottle that feeling and sell it to their worst enemies, the beta brand name would be "Fear Bile." It tasted sour, old, and chunky. I felt my scalp prickling with hot needles, and my heart was beating so fast it felt like a boxer was doing ten rounds in my throat. Print is permanent, I thought over and over:You can't take it back.Cheers, brain.I could feel the dread dropping and mixing in my belly. The woman in me who wants to be perfect, liked, and universally admired started frantically Googling alternatives to the word c*nt. "Does b*tch still catch the vibe?" "Maybe I use an asterisk throughout to be less offensive?" "Are Americans more sensitive about the c-word than British people?" "With Fear Bile swilling, my gut cut to the chase: "Sit down and don't get up until you remember why you're writing this book."What was my "why"?I got into what's often called self-development, wellness, or healing work when I was 29. It was my version of Custer's Last Stand. I'd struggled with eating disorders, over-working, excessive exercise, morbid self-hatred, and swamp-like depression from the age of 11. No one noticed. because on the outside my life looked great. In my business I call these women "Ghost Women," "high-functioning struggling women," and "the women who hide in plain sight."I was hiding very well! I was an All-American Division 1 athlete. I made good money, I often got promoted without asking for it, and I fitted very easily into the white, heteronormative, slim-ideal. How bad could my life really be? Quite bad, actually. I dreamed about my funeral a lot.On the eve of my third decade, I broke. The diets weren't working. The darkness was rarely lifting. Do you know the only thing that can outrun a vampire and drag you deeper than the pits of hell? Your own self-loathing and drab disdain. Nothing works. Nothing matters. You don't matter.I knew something had to change, but a few vain attempts to get help in my late teens and early twenties had left me alienated and armoured with thick disdain for traditional therapy.I went "alternative."I started playing around with forced presence, meditation, visualisation, and breathwork. I learned about diet culture, read a book about intuitive eating, and taught myself how to eat normally again. I invested in coaching that focused on working with younger parts of myself, core wounds, attachment styles, and core belief systems.It was scary, heavy, and confronting to deconstruct all the embodied and unconscious systems of oppression that had morphed together to become the woman I saw every morning in the mirror. Related: We've Been Raised Like Wolves to Hunt Like Wolves!emerged a year later gobsnacked that I'd achieved something I thought impossible: I understood myself.Perhaps more profound? I liked myself. Quite a lot.My next step was clear: I have to find a way to share this work with women. And at every turn, I wanted it to look, and sound, and feel like something that was possible for "a woman like me."What kind of woman was I speaking to?I always thought my "issues" were special. A few months into doing healing work, I realised I was far from a unicorn. Versions of me existed in every home, gym, job, and restaurant bathroom I'd ever stepped foot into.How had I been blind to myself, and other women for so long?The answer was simple: It's hard to see pain that hides in plain sight.Through working with a lot of high-achieving struggling women over the last couple of years, I've realised invisible suffering can manifest in a million ways. The cruel part? Invisible suffering is reinforced by a society that idolizes and reinforces strong women who are deeply committed to manufacturing their self-worth through working hard.Invisible suffering can look like a woman in her twenties who has an obscenely well-paid and pressure-filled job who goes home and hinges until she passes out. It can look like the vice president of an agency whose intuitive nature was mocked and shamed as "overly sensitive" in her childhood, leading her to zip up and numb for decades. It can look like a soldier who dominates her data-driven job, but in her personal relationships feels deeply unworthy and insecure. It can look like a young woman building a career in user-experience design whose inner critic is so loud and cruel that she's never published her portfolio. And sometimes it can look like the president of a company who can't accept that when she's most herself she is brash and loud, because those traits were annihilated by her teenage bullies.In short, women experience trauma and we're good at working to hide it. But these micro- and macro-tears in our sense of self scar over in time to create a mangled identity blueprint that on the outside looks great, but on the inside feels very, very wrong. This tension makes us cruel.Whatever walk of professional or personal experience high-functioning struggling women come from, there are common threads. My clients grow up with some awareness of being talented, creative, strong, independent, or "a little different." At some point, they get gaslighted by their own gifts and grow to feel broken. On the outside, they still "pass." Often, they shine. On the inside, they eat themselves alive. The common refrain? "I can't show weakness." "If I say anything they'll realise I'm a fraud." "Who am I to complain? I should feel lucky."The end result?Women end up holding a lot in. At some point we start feeding on, and leaking, our own poison.Why we make other women the enemyOne day after a particularly poor display of woman-to-woman camaraderie, my college field hockey coach told me and my teammates a story about lobsters. Apparently, when thrown in boiling water, male lobsters built ladders with their claws to try to help each other escape. In contrast, female lobsters locked their claws together and held each other down. If I die, you die. I have no idea if this story is true. I know I've never forgotten the story. Women who have read my book reference the story often.Emotions are energy in motion; they need channeling. How women who suffer invisibly channel inner turmoil can look like maniacally climbing the career ladder, dieting hard, being aggressively competitive and cut-throat, or desperately people-pleasing. Other women become both our worst enemy if they feel like a threat, or fodder if they look easy to eat.Comments about other women's bodies. Talking over, and down to, them at work. Quietly discussing how I swooped in and rescued a project, making them blush with shame in their averageness. I'm not proud. But I did those things.And I was not the only woman I knew who was feasting on weakness. Many women who struggle invisibly have smelt blood in the water, and pounced. I've been held down, or put out to dry, or trampled on by other women more times than I care to think about.These painful relational dynamics between women don't exist in a vacuum. Yes, many women have found a way to thrive in a patriarchal system. It's possible. But the narrative that air space and opportunity is more scarce for women isn't a disempowered fairy tale from a past century: It's a present day reality. Just look at the mass exodus of women from the workforce in the last year. No one told women to take on the burden of the pandemic; it was in the water. The dearth of female founders or women leading design agencies isn't an anomaly.When you mix scarcity of opportunity with women who are fighting to feel whole through collecting external validation and evidence of their self-worth, it's no surprise other women become competition, and collateral damage.We get catty and cruel. By growing to understand how my invisible suffering and awful self-image had impacted my treatment of and relationships with other women, I found myself questioning who was bringing awareness to this woman-on-woman wounding in any kind of honest way. I saw white space.Was my target audience ready for me to hold up the mirror, so they could stare into their own eyes? Would I regret unlocking my own Pandora's box in the hope that one day, they might be brave enough to unlock their own?Time to find out.Speaking about uncomfortable truthI didn't get much out of my graduate degree in advertising except a visa extension, but I did learn this: When you're starting a business get your brand values, mission, and vision straight, then make it your job to get to know your ideal client intimately. Climb into their bed, get into their head, speak their language, and understand their deepest and darkest secrets. Wrap words around the stuff they'd never say out loud and, perhaps most importantly, care deeply about their freedom.I stole myself to get brave.I was already building a small following by sharing my own experience of unhooking from invisible pain. I was also hosting weekly classes centered around breathwork and beginning to attract ideal clients. I looked over all my session notes with the women I was working with, then emailed 10 other women who felt creative, wolfish, a black sheep, successful, or "too strong for their own good" and asked if they had 30 minutes to chat.I asked loads of questions about assumptions made about their life, how they actually felt inside, and how invisible pain manifested for them. I asked about their body image and self-worth. I also asked about their relationships with other women.My research confirmed what I already knew to be true: Jealousy towards other women, tear-downs, and general grabs for power through dominance was a reality and a source of shame, fear, and eroded trust for pretty much everyone I spoke to.So in a sea of light weight, soulless self-help littered with shallow ideas, script fonts, too much pink, and the word "goddess," how could I serve these women in a meaningful way through the book I was writing?I wanted to cut through the noise with my own brand of liberation. So I started writing about very uncomfortable things. I centered myself in the conversation. And I wrote like I speak: bluntly. I wrote about the way I used to fat shame women at the gym every morning. I wrote about the ways I trampled all over my naturally more open and sunny little sister, whose disposition and easy relationship with my mum intensified how much of a black sheep I felt that I was growing up. I wrote about the women I worked with professionally and how I'd find ways to undermine their neuroses and weak points to give myself a quick hit of dominance. Understanding that the underlying reasons why women feel jealous, competitive, or act aggressively towards other women is a reflection of our own invisible suffering can help us collectively heal by taking individual responsibility for the ways we hurt. Our "real" lives are a reflection of our internal environment. We must start there. I also wrote about life on the other side of invisible pain. Meeting myself with gentleness and honesty and unpacking my own wounds opened a well of empathy for the ways other women fight to survive in this world, and my clients feel that understanding deeply. Five years ago, if you'd told me that supporting women in their most vulnerable truth and speaking about the power of bravery would be my business, I'd have laughed! But here I am. I'm good at it. And I watch the women I work with bloom.Did the risk pay off?So, did I edit the word "c*nt out of my book? Did I soften myself up to make what I offer universally palatable?Did the risk of opening my past life up for scrutiny pay off? No. No. And yes.When my book launched in January I kept waiting for a mass character assassination. At the very least, judgement.The opposite happened.Women said they couldn't put it down. Women said they had to read a page at a time because it confronted them so directly. One woman thanked me and said "you really took one for the team." Another said it was the first time she'd heard someone talk about the shame we all experience but try so hard to hide. Another said she picked up the book expecting to at worst hate it, and at best, not relate: Instead she connected loads of dots and felt seen. Another thanked me for making her invisible struggles visible. "I'm not the only one?"The takeaway? Women were breathing in fresh air they didn't know they needed. The book felt true to them. Wrapping it upSharing about how inner turmoil can become projected aggression opened up doors for conversation with women in my community around jealousy, scarcity, fear, and tear-down culture. It created a safe space for examination of why we feel like we're endlessly competing in a game we didn't choose to play, and can't win. It also encouraged women to work to understand how our implicit and embodied self-criticism becomes a weapon. We have to diffuse the bombs ticking inside us from a very young age, telling us what we "should" do to survive in this world.There are no losers when awareness is collectively heightened.Which brings me back to building my business around bravery. In a world of fakery, filters, and fast-fixes, we are starving for purpose-filled honesty and vulnerability. When I set out to support high-functioning struggling women and shine a light on what most people aren't willing to talk about, I had to grow my capacity to be brave about owning my life experiences.That meant looking like a pretty "bad" woman and potentially offending people with my particular flavour of truth. So be it. Am I a fully self-actualized woman? No. Am I a beacon of embodied selflessness? No. Did I get the full picture, cover every angle, and get it all right? No.Did every woman I've interacted with over the years read my book, understand me, and forgive me if they'd interacted with me when I wasn't kind? No.That wasn't the point.I didn't write the book for everyone. My work isn't for everyone. And that's ok. My book was not an apology. It was an invitation.My goal for my business was for women who struggle invisibly to feel seen and understood, perhaps for the first time.And they were.Was it risky to be vulnerable in my business? Was it scary to admit I had been a c*nt?Yes. But I would do it again tomorrow.In fact, I will.Related: 6 Ways to Stop Working So Hard and Like Yourself More

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