



An Interview with Dr. Kirstin Neff

Kristin Neff PhD, is an Associate Professor of Human Development at the University of Texas at Austin. She is a pioneering researcher into the psychological health benefits of self-compassion. She is the author of *Self-Compassion: Step-by-Step*, and is featured in the book and documentary: *The Horse Boy* which tells the story of her family's journey to Mongolia in search of healing for her son's autism.

Dr. Bialylew: Welcome Kristin, thank you so much for joining us.

Dr. Neff: Thank you, I'm happy to be a part of it.

Dr. Bialylew: So we might jump straight into the questions. To begin with can you help us to actually understand what self-compassion is?

Dr. Neff: Yes, so actually, one of the first things I did when I wanted to research self-compassion was come up with a clear definition so we could measure it. I define self-compassion as having 3 main components.

The first is maybe the most obvious, and that's being kind, supportive and encouraging toward yourself as opposed to harshly judgmental. So you might say treating yourself like you treat the good friends you care about. Of course most of us don't treat ourselves the way we treat the friends we care about. We actually treat ourselves like people we don't care for very much. For self-compassion we reverse that. We're kind to ourselves. Also part of being a good friend or being a caring person is when someone's upset you kind of actively comfort them and you do what you can to help. So with self-kindness we actively try to help ourselves by soothing, comforting and caring for ourselves when we're suffering in some way. By the way, that suffering could either be some felt inadequacy or failure or it could be some generalized suffering like a health condition or financial circumstances, something like that.

The second component of self-compassion, I see as a sense of common humanity versus isolation. So recognizing imperfection, both personal imperfection and just struggles with imperfection in our life more generally is part of the human condition. What happens, although everyone might say, "of course it is", I understand that logically. When we fail or we do something we don't like, where we have judgment of ourselves or again, some struggle happens, there's this illogical emotional sense that

something has gone wrong. Like “this isn’t normal”. What’s normal is supposed to be, “everything is going great, I’m doing perfectly.” And when that’s not the case something has gone wrong. And that sense of abnormality actually creates a sense of isolation, like “it’s just me who failed” or “it’s me who has been rejected” or “only me who’s had this happen to them.” It’s not logical but emotionally that sense of isolation and being abnormal and cut off from the rest of the world is really adding insult to injury because not only are you suffering, but you feel alone in your suffering. So again, with self-compassion, every moment of suffering or failure or making a mistake actually helps connect you to other people. So instead of trying to compare yourself to other people in terms of “am I doing better than them?” “Are they doing better than me?” It’s really seeing the shared nature of our human condition which is imperfect.

And then the third component is mindfulness. So, normally, when there is something negative, some negative thing about ourselves or our lives we try to get rid of it or avoid it and don’t acknowledge it. In order to give ourselves compassion in order to open up our hearts to ourselves, *we have to be able to turn toward and acknowledge suffering.* We have to be able to hold it into our awareness without resistance, accept that it is happening and then respond to that suffering with kindness and mindfulness. So mindfulness, you might say, is really the first step to self-compassion. It’s a noticing, noticing we’re suffering, and then being aware of how we are responding to that suffering.

Dr. Bialylew: That’s such a clear and helpful way to understand it. It’s also the idea of flipping these things that seem to be almost natural default settings for people, turning them around.

Dr. Neff: Right, exactly, yeah and sadly self-compassion doesn’t seem to be the default setting and it’s certainly not encouraged in our culture, at least the western culture. For many people compassion is a radical act. Our culture says thrive, do more, you’re not good enough as you are, buy more expensive jeans, maybe you’ll be good enough but probably not. So to say, “Actually I am good enough” and to say I’m going to encourage and support myself as oppose to always striving to do better usually through using the whip of self-criticism. ... It is a radical act.

Dr. Bialylew: “The whip of self-criticism.” I like that. I was going to ask you why you think it is that we tend to be so uncompassionate to ourselves? What is the main obstacle to being self-compassionate? What’s the gain there for people?

Dr. Neff: There’s a lot of reasons people aren’t self-compassionate but probably the number one is people think they need to be harshly self-critical to motivate themselves. That if they’re kind and they’re encouraging, they’ll basically be lazy and passive and not reach their goals. So a lot of people drive themselves to work harder and achieve their goals by, really...you know, it’s almost like “if you don’t reach your goal I’m going to hammer you with self-criticism.” We think we believe that we need to be harshly self-critical so we can drive ourselves. ***In fact research shows just the opposite. That people who are encouraging and supportive of themselves, who believe in themselves, they’re more likely to reach their goals and what’s really important is that if they fail to reach their goals, they’re more likely to try again.*** If you’re a harsh self-critic and you fail to reach your goal you often give up hope. You don’t try again because the consequences of failure are too painful. Just like a coach, a coach

can motivate his players in two ways, “you lazy slob, you’ll never amount to anything I’m ashamed of you.” Or he can motivate his players by saying, “I believe in you. What can I do to encourage and support you?” and that type of encouragement and support is actually going to get the most out of his players and it’s really the same with us.

Dr. Bialylew: You mentioned some of the research and you’ve written a wonderful book that’s rich in the research that you’ve done. I wonder if you could share a little bit more about the research you’ve done and maybe pull out a couple of particularly compelling points that come to mind at this moment.

Dr. Neff: Ok. In broad brush strokes self-compassion is very strongly linked to less problematic emotional and mental states like depression, anxiety and stress. There was actually a recent meta-analysis, which is where they pull together a lot of different studies and it found self compassion had a strong effect. What’s interesting and perhaps less intuitive is self-compassion is equally strongly related to positive outcomes like happiness and life satisfaction. What’s happening according to my interpretation is self-compassion embraces suffering and wraps it in this sense of loving, connected presence. Which is another way of talking about self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. Loving connected, presence. Those are also positive emotions. So ***Self-compassion alleviates the suffering of the negative mind states at the same time as it generates positive ones.*** It does this simultaneously and it does it without the sugar coating of positive thinking, “everything’s ok”. It says “No, everything’s not ok, the present is not okay but can I be kind and caring towards myself?”

We just published a study looking at relationship behavior. People who were more self-compassionate were much more intimate, and they granted a lot more autonomy, and were less controlling in relationships. People were much more satisfied having a relationship with a self-compassionate partner which makes sense because when you can meet a lot of your own emotional needs and you aren’t reliant on your partner to meet all of your needs exactly as you want them met and exactly when you want them met, you have more resource to give to other people. So self-compassion is not selfish. Some people think self-compassion is somehow selfish but actually the more you fill your own cup the more you have to give to others and it really helps maintain good relationships.

Another study, this one slightly counter intuitive shows that there is a weak association between compassion for ourselves and compassion for others. So a lot of people say you can’t be compassionate to others unless you’re compassionate to yourself. Well actually how many people do you know who are very compassionate to others and are very hard on themselves? It’s a very common pattern so the two don’t necessarily go hand in hand, but we do know though that it’s more sustainable if you’re self-compassionate. ***Self-compassion is linked to less compassion fatigue or burnout for instance.*** So, you can be compassionate to others without being compassionate to yourself, but if you give and give and give eventually your cup will run dry.

Dr. Bialylew: In terms of going into the mind/body connection - can you share any underlying physiology that you might know about in relation to being compassionate to yourself, I’ve read some of your work around touch which was really very fascinating.

Dr. Neff: Yeah, absolutely. What happens in self-criticism is we're tapping into the body's threat defense system, fight or flight response. So when we see a threat in the environment our cortisol goes up our adrenalin goes up and we get ready for fight or flight. The system was designed for physical threats but nowadays most of threats are through our self-concept. So if we fail, we feel inadequate that system still gets triggered and with self-criticism it's really not a good situation we're both the attacker and the attacked. We attack the problem, which is ourselves and we feel attacked. **So self-criticism is linked to a lot of cortisol release for instance and it can lead to stress and eventually depression.**

Compassion operates from a different system, so what changed from reptiles to mammals, is that mammals have a long developmental period. They're born very immature, they have a longer time to grow up and adapt to their environment. So a system evolved which is termed the 'mammalian care giving system' sometimes it's known as the 'attachment system', there's a lot of different names for it. Mammals evolved so that in the presence of three basic features, which are physical warmth, a soft gentle touch and soothing vocalization, the infant feels safe, feels calm and that's what keeps the infant near the mother and not wandering off into the dangerous realm. ***So what we're doing when we sooth and comfort ourselves with self-compassion, is we're really nurturing ourselves like we would nurture a distressed baby or child, which means we release oxytocin and lower our cortisol levels which helps us feel safe. So one of the key benefits of self-compassion is that it helps us feel safe and that puts us in the mind state to really do our best. That's one of the reasons in our workshop we really emphasize physical gestures of compassion. Things like putting your hands to your heart because your body immediately responds to that gentle touch and the warmth of your hand. So sometimes your mind can't go there it's lost in the story of how inadequate you are but your body often can go there.***

Dr. Bialylew: That's absolutely fascinating. The idea of putting your hand on your heart, physically comforting yourself could seem a bit woowaah to a lot of people, but interesting that it actually has scientific backing.

Dr. Neff: You can feel it if you try, you can feel your body relax and calm down. It evolved to do so.

Dr. Bialylew: Which is just incredible that we have this tool at our own disposal to actually give ourselves comfort. Just coming back to some of the ideas of self-compassion, you mention that some people think it might be selfish. How do you distinguish self-compassion from self-pity?

Dr. Neff: Ok, so that's where the common humanity comes in. That's where the mindfulness comes in. Self-pity usually refers to "woe is me", "why me" and then it often tends to exaggerate how bad things are. Like woe is me. Self-compassion is "life is difficult for everyone" it's not self-focused, it's actually, you might say, group focused or focused on not the self but the larger human condition and the mindfulness is that we see what's happening clearly. We aren't exaggerating. We're not belittling but we aren't exaggerating either. If you didn't have common humanity and mindfulness, self-kindness could be self-pity that's why you need those three components. It feels really different. You might be going down the path of self-pity and then you remember "Oh wait a second, life is difficult for everyone, I'm not the only one feeling this." And then the whole experience changes.

Dr. Bialylew: Would you be able to share a couple of practical tools or practical ways of bringing self-compassion into your life when you might be having a crappy day? People might be wondering you know, “Ok, this is all good but how do I actually do this?”

Dr. Neff: How do I do it? On my website which is selfcompassion.org, I have a lot of exercises in there. I can try to describe a couple that are very helpful to your listeners. One handy dandy one we call the **self-compassion break**. What that does is it combines a physical gesture, like the hands on your heart, with words that evokes the three components of self-compassion. **So let’s say you just failed at something and you’re feeling really bad, you can take a self-compassion break which basically involves putting your hand either on your heart or giving yourself a hug, some sort of physical gesture and saying words like “this is a moment of suffering.” which brings mindfulness, “suffering is part of life”, recognizing common humanity and then “may I be kind to myself”.** That involves saying words to yourself that you would use to a friend who’s involved in a similar situation. That’s an MP3 on my website it takes about 5 minutes.

Self-compassionate letter writing. There’s a study that found that if you write a self-compassionate letter which is basically when you’re struggling in some way you write yourself a letter from the perspective of a very caring other, like a really close family or a close friend would say to you. If you do that for 7 days straight it reduces depression for 3 months and increases happiness for 6 months. So in a sense the way we relate to ourselves has lasting effect on wellbeing.

So I would say letter writing, self-compassion break and also guided meditation on my website. Meditation as you know is a tried and true way of changing our brain and our brain wave patterns. So doing things like loving kindness meditation where you say a set of phrases evoking feelings of good will and benevolence for yourself. There’s other meditations in there too which are designed, not just to cultivate mindful awareness of what’s happening, but also the loving, affectionate, caring response to whatever is arising. So there’s three ways.

Dr. Bialylew: Right, fantastic. Do you see any relationship between self-compassion and courage?

Dr. Neff: Yes! So, like I’ve said before in some ways, choosing to be self-compassionate when our culture teaches us that it’s soft, wimpy and we should be self-critical, that in of itself is an act of courage. But, there’s a term that’s used in the Buddhist circles called fierce compassion, right? Compassion can be fierce, compassion wants the alleviation of suffering. Sometimes, to reach the goal of alleviation of suffering we think of Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, we have to say “No, that’s not okay” right? We need to stand up to suffering. So for instance, people think that maybe you’re going to be soft or wimpy if you have self-compassion, you won’t let yourself be taken advantage of if you have self-compassion, because that’s going to cause you suffering. So you might be willing to take a very firm stand with self-compassion against anyone trying to cause you harm, including ourselves. We’re engaged in a behavior that’s causing ourselves harm. Sometimes we need to be courageous, first of all to admit what’s happening. Self-compassion gives us the courage to admit when we’re doing things that are harmful to ourselves and others because it’s safe to do so. ***And then it gives us, you might say, the***

supportive mindset we need to stand up to the suffering that's being caused either by ourselves or others. So absolutely, self-compassion is very courageous.

Dr. Bialylew: So, really through this conversation, self-compassion seems to be a foundation to support so many other positive virtues including courage, creativity and innovation... The willingness to kind of fail and not be too hard on yourself.

Dr. Neff: There's some research showing that it's linked to creativity and partly that's because when we're really negative including the self-judgment, our attention narrows, and our thinking gets more rigid. When we feel safe we get more flexible, we get more creative, we aren't so narrowly focused. That's one of the ways self-compassion actually helps us to be better problem solvers and helps us be more motivated. It's linked to a lot of variables they study in positive psychology, things like happiness, life satisfaction, and gratitude for instance, forgiveness...it seems to be a very robust, you might call it an emotional regulation strategy or coping strategy. **What's great is it doesn't matter what's happening, it's how you relate to what's happening.** Even if, there was a study looking at veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan which showed that their level of self-compassion was more predictive of whether or not they developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And there's other similar findings. **So it's how you relate to the suffering in your life that's even more important than how much suffering you experience.**

And it's the same with ourselves - we don't have to be perfect. We just need to relate to all aspects of ourselves with kindness that will enable us to be, you know, as good as we can to be happy in the midst of our imperfection.

Dr. Bialylew: Thank you so much for your time. It's been a really rich conversation. Before we finish, if there was anything else for you that we haven't covered but you feel is really important.

Dr. Neff: One thing I didn't mention which is, I think one thing that is important is the difference between self-esteem and self-compassion. One of the ways that self-compassion is radical, is it ends the self-esteem game, which is basically self-esteem is defining or judging ourselves positively. Our entire culture is geared towards wanting to be judged positively. Being special and above average. That need to be above average means we're very competitive in our society we're always comparing ourselves to others and a lot of our isolation is caused by this need to feel better than others. Things like violence, bullying in schools, prejudice a lot of those are driven by the need for self-esteem. Also, self-esteem is contingent on success. We feel good about ourselves when we succeed but what happens if we fail, precisely when we need it, our self-esteem deserts us.

So self-compassion this the way of relating well to yourself that just requires that you be a flawed human being like everyone else, you don't have to be better than anyone else and it's not contingent upon success or failure. So self-compassion is much more inclined with the more cooperative ethic as opposed to a more individualistic and competitive one.

Dr. Bialylew: Thank you, thank you for that. You do talk a lot about that in your book so I'm really glad you just brought that up.

Dr. Neff: Yes, so self-esteem is an unwinnable game. You will always be imperfect and someone will always be better than you, that's just reality. I'd rather be self-compassionate.

Dr. Bialylew: That would be particularly interesting in the context of parenting and the idea of how much we hear about self-esteem and how important that is to cultivate in your children. Thinking about how to bring about the education of self-compassion to younger people seems very powerful.

Dr. Neff: Also just your focus on meditation the real importance of being self-compassionate while you're meditating. Not criticizing yourself when you can't stay on your breath, or your mind is wandering, not falling into "I'm just a lousy meditator, I'm useless, another thing I'm not good at". If you can remember to be self-compassionate during your experience in meditation that is the practice.

What I believe is more important than staying on your breath or being focused, is cultivating that habit of responding with kindness to whatever arises.

Dr. Bialylew: Just imagining now that there's someone sitting in their meditation and that critical moment comes up when they get distracted. What would you suggest? Is it just a matter of taking a moment to actually say something to yourself? How would you suggest someone could do that?

Dr. Neff: First, to notice it. To notice what's occurring. Often times it's so subtle we don't even realize we're criticizing ourselves or it may manifest as a real tension so using mindfulness to notice it's occurring, self-criticism is occurring and then really trying to, sometimes we say in meditation when your mind wanders bring it back to the object which may be the breath with the same quality of the attention and kindness you would use as if a child would wander off, you know, gently holding the child's hand, bringing it back to the task at hand. So really every moment of distraction is not a failure in meditation but it's an opportunity to practice self compassion. So, you can always put your hand on your heart while you're meditating, it's not against the rules that I'm aware of.

Dr. Bialylew: That seems like a beautiful place to end. Thank you so much. It's been wonderful chatting with you.