

If you begin to understand what you are without trying to change it, then what you are undergoes a transformation. --Jiddu Krishnamurti

The Power of Self-Compassion

Kristin Neff in an interview with Jason Marsh

Are you your own worst critic? It's common to beat ourselves up for faults big and small. But according to psychologist Kristin Neff, that self-criticism comes at a price: It makes us anxious, dissatisfied with our life, and even depressed. For the last decade, Kristin Neff has been a pioneer in the study of "self-compassion," the revolutionary idea that you can actually be kind to yourself, accept your own faults—and enjoy deep emotional benefits as a result. Last year, she distilled the results of her research in the popular book *Self-Compassion*.

What is self-compassion?

Self-compassion is treating yourself with the same type of kind, caring support and understanding that you would show to anyone you care about. In fact, most of us make incredibly harsh, cruel self-judgments that we would never make about a total stranger, let alone someone we care about.

Three core components of self-compassion:

1. **Self-kindness**, as opposed to self-judgment. A lot of times when we suffer, we just take a very cold attitude toward ourselves. So self-compassion involves being warm and supportive—actively soothing ourselves—as opposed to being cold and judging ourselves.
2. **Imperfection is part of the shared human experience**—you're not alone in your suffering. Often, when something goes wrong, we look in the mirror and don't like what we see—we feel very isolated, as if everyone else has these perfect lives and it's just us who's flawed and defective. When we remember that imperfection is part of the shared human experience, you can actually feel more connected to people in those moments.
3. **Mindfulness**. If you aren't mindfully aware that you're suffering, if you're just repressing your pain or ignoring it or getting lost in problem solving, you can't give yourself compassion. You have to say, "Wait a second. This hurts. This is really hard. This is a moment where I need compassion." If you don't want to go there, if it's too painful or you're just too busy to go there, you can't be compassionate.

What is the difference between self-compassion and self-esteem?

Self-compassion and self-esteem both involve positive emotions toward the self. But self-esteem is about judging yourself positively: I am good. Or, unfortunately, if you can't keep up that self-definition: I am bad.

Self-compassion does not involve judgment or evaluation. It's not about, "What type of person am I?" It's just about: I'm suffering—can I respond to my suffering with kindness, understanding, caring, and concern? Self-esteem is present when we succeed. Self-compassion is a way of relating to ourselves kindly when we fail.

Self-esteem is all about being special and above average. You subtly try to position yourself above other people so you can maintain your self-esteem. But self-compassion is about shared humanity—it's about being average. It's about being a human: We have strengths and beautiful qualities, and we have weaknesses; we succeed and we fail and it's all part of this shared human condition.

Why do we treat ourselves differently than we try to treat others?

We believe self-criticism will motivate us. We think beating ourselves up if we make mistakes will keep us from doing it again. It's a convoluted form of self-care: I criticize myself because I don't want to keep engaging in this behavior. But it's completely counterproductive. Self-criticism is strongly linked to depression. And depression is antithetical to motivation: You're unable to be motivated to change if you're depressed. It causes us to lose faith in ourselves, and that's going to make us less likely to try to change and conditions us for failure. If every time you fail or make a mistake you beat yourself up, you'll try to avoid failure at all costs. It's a natural survival instinct. Which means you may not take risks—maybe you take the course that's an easy A (instead of a more challenging one).

Maybe the biggest problem with using self-criticism as a motivator is that if it's really painful to be honest with yourself about your weaknesses—because you know you're going to tear yourself to shreds with self-criticism—your subconscious

pulls every trick in the book to not have to own up to your weaknesses.

The easiest trick is to blame someone else. Think about fights you have had—“You did it!” “No, you did it!” Each one is trying to defend their ego, blaming the other person. But having self-compassion, gives you the courage and the emotional safety you need to say, “Mea culpa—I did do that, I was out of line.” And that clarity gives you not only the wisdom to see what needs changing, but also the emotional strength and courage to change it.

How did you come to believe in the importance of self-compassion?

When I got to grad school, I decided I had to reject my hippie, New-Agey childhood. I was going through a very messy divorce, and I was stressed about finishing my dissertation and finding a job. There was a lot going on in my life. I realized that when I just went for the intellect and tried to reject all my spirituality, I was shutting myself down. So I decided to give Buddhism a try.

I started meditating. The lady teaching the meditation class talked a lot about self-compassion. ‘You really should be kind to yourself, and it will actually be healthy if you are?’ It made so much sense. It changed my life. It really saved me when my son was diagnosed with autism in 2004. I can’t imagine how I would have coped if I didn’t have my self-compassion practice. I was able to fully accept my grief, not feel guilty for grieving, which a lot of autism parents do: “How can I be grieving for my child who I love so much?” I was able to accept all my complex, intense emotions, to soothe and comfort myself for what I was going through.

With autism, you are powerless. When my son used to have tantrums in public, there was nothing I could do. I was completely powerless. I could try to keep him safe and that’s about it. So self-compassion allowed me to accept that, and open my heart to it—he’d be throwing a tantrum, and I would be saying, “Let me be kind to myself right now, let me be kind to myself, let me...” I would focus on myself rather than him, after making sure he was safe. I couldn’t help him, but I could help myself in that moment.

Self-compassion gave me the emotional stability I needed to help him, and then ultimately to embrace him, with a much more open heart and open mind than I would have been able to—to not try to fix him or control him but to celebrate who I was and kind of follow his lead.

What has your research shown you about the benefits of self-compassion?

Data supports the fact that self-compassion leads to less depression, more optimism, greater happiness, more life satisfaction. Self-compassion offers the benefits without the drawbacks of self-esteem. Self-esteem is associated with narcissism; self-compassion isn’t. It’s self-compassion, not self-esteem, that predicts stability of self-worth—a type of self-worth that isn’t contingent on outcomes—as well as less social comparison, less reactive anger.

Research is coming out that shows that people who practice self-compassion make wiser health choices. They exercise more for intrinsic reasons, they can stick to their diets, they go to the doctor more often, they practice safer sex. All this research is coming out showing that self-compassion is not just a good idea, and it doesn’t just make you feel good; it makes you act in healthier ways.

People who are self-compassionate are kinder, more giving, and supportive to their relationship partners.

There’s a lot of research on MBSR—Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program—and the benefits that accrue from that. It turns out that self-compassion increases through participation in the course; in fact, it may be that self-compassion is perhaps even the most powerful outcome of MBSR training that enhances well-being.

Does self-compassion make people complacent and unmotivated to improve themselves and accomplish more?

That is a common concern. It is, I think, the number one block to self-compassion: the fear that if I’m too kind to myself, I’ll be complacent. The research supports that people who are self-compassionate, set high standards for themselves, but they don’t get as upset when they fail to meet their goals—they cope with it more productively. As a result, when self-compassionate people don’t reach a goal, they’re much more likely to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and re-engage in a new goal.

Self-compassion is associated with what’s called “learning goals” rather than “performance goals.” So people who are self-compassionate, want to learn and grow for its own sake, not because they want to impress other people. There is a huge

body of research shows that having a goal of learning as opposed to impressing others, is a much more sustainable way of learning and growing.

The truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer, because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you in proportion to your fear of being hurt. Thomas Merton

Physiology of Self-Compassion

Kristin Neff

For the past decade or so I've been conducting research on self-compassion, and have found that people who are compassionate to themselves are much less likely to be depressed, anxious, and stressed, and are much more likely to be happy, resilient, and optimistic about their future. In short, they have better mental health.

The power of self-compassion is not just an idea - it's very real and actually manifests in our bodies. When we soothe our own pain we are tapping into the mammalian care-giving system. And one important way the care-giving system works is by triggering the release of oxytocin. Research indicates that increased levels of oxytocin strongly increase feelings of trust, calm, safety, generosity, and connectedness, and facilitates the ability to feel warmth and compassion for ourselves. Oxytocin is released in a variety of social situations, including when a mother breastfeeds her child, when parents interact with their young children, or when someone gives or receives a soft, tender caress. Because thoughts and emotions have the same effect on our bodies whether they're directed to ourselves or to others, this research suggests that self-compassion may be a powerful trigger for the release of oxytocin.

Self-criticism appears to have a very different effect on our body. The amygdala is the oldest part of the brain, and is designed to quickly detect threats in the environment. When we experience a threatening situation, the fight-or flight response is triggered: The amygdala sends signals that increases blood pressure, adrenaline, and the hormone cortisol, mobilizing the strength and energy needed to confront or avoid a threat. Although this system was designed by evolution to deal with physical attacks, it is activated just as readily by emotional attacks. By ourselves or others. Recent research indicates that generating feelings of self-compassion actually decreases our cortisol levels. In one study conducted by Helen Rockliff and her colleagues, researchers asked participants to imagine receiving compassion and feeling it in their bodies. Every minute they were told things like "Allow yourself to feel that you are the recipient of great compassion; allow yourself to feel the loving-kindness that is there for you." It was found that the participants given these instructions had lower cortisol levels after the imagery than those in the control group. Participants also demonstrated increased heart rate variability afterwards. The safer people feel, the more open and flexible they can be in response to their environment, and this is reflected in how much their heart rate varies in response to stimuli. So you could say that by giving themselves compassion, participants' hearts actually opened and became less defensive.

When we soothe our painful feelings with the healing balm of self-compassion, not only are we changing our mental and emotional experience, we're also changing our body chemistry. An effective aspect of self-compassion practice, therefore, is to tap into our body's self-healing system through physical sensations.

This means that an easy way to calm and comfort yourself when you're feeling badly is through soothing touch. It seems a bit silly at first, but your body doesn't know that. It just responds to the physical gesture of warmth and care, just as a baby responds to being held in its mother's arms. Remember, physical touch releases oxytocin, reduces cortisol and calms cardiovascular stress. So why not try it? If you notice that you're feeling tense, upset, or self-critical, try giving yourself a warm hug, or tenderly stroking your arm or face, or gently rocking your body. What's important is that you make a clear gesture that conveys feelings of love, care, and tenderness. If other people are around, you can often fold your arms in a non-obvious way, gently squeezing yourself in a comforting manner. Notice how your body feels after receiving the hug or caress. Does it feel warmer, softer, calmer? It's amazing how easy it is to tap into mammalian caregiving system and change your bio-chemical experience