



CHRISTOPHER GERMER

‘I think we’re at the beginning of a great wave of compassion’

LEARNING TO BE SELF-COMPASSIONATE HELPED

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, LECTURER AND AUTHOR

CHRISTOPHER GERMER OVERCOME ANXIOUS THOUGHTS.

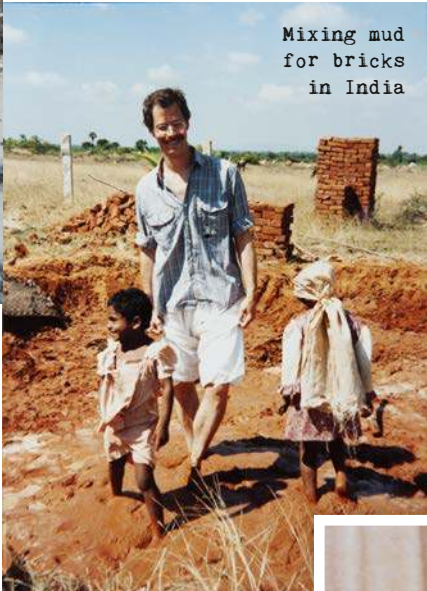
WE TALK TO HIM ABOUT HIS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.



Ralph taking me
for a ride



Me with
my parents
and older
brother
Ralph
in 1953



Mixing mud
for bricks
in India



Taking
a bath

Pilgrimage
to India
with my
wife Claire
in 1987



NAME: Christopher Germer
BORN: New York, US
CAREER: Clinical psychologist. Germer has been integrating the principles and practices of meditation into psychotherapy since 1978. He is a part-time Lecturer on Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School/ Cambridge Health Alliance and he also has a small private practice in mindfulness- and compassion-based psychotherapy in Arlington, Massachusetts, US. Together with Kristin Neff, he has developed the eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion program, co-founded the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion and co-authored two books. Germer lives with his wife Claire in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

At the
Sai Baba
ashram in
India
in 1986



Family vacation
in Washington,
D.C. (1963)



My high
school
yearbook
photo (1970)

PAST

'I REALIZED THAT WHEN WE ARE KIND TO OURSELVES, WE IMMEDIATELY HAVE THIS UPRISING OF AFFECTION AND CARE FOR OTHERS'

My earliest memories are fragments. I remember that I used to love going to Jones Beach on Long Island, New York, and playing in the sand. My father was from Germany. He started the company Agfa and sold cameras and film in New York City after the war. My mother was born and raised in Switzerland and she worked as a secretary at the Swiss consulate in Cincinnati. They met in 1949 and I was born in New York—in Flushing, Queens. Soon after that my parents moved to Great Neck on Long Island—probably because they had good schools there. I have three brothers; I was the second son. Yes, a family of four boys. It was fun—it still is.

My father commuted into the city for work and we didn't see that much of him. **My mother really was full-on as a mom, but she was a Swiss mom, which means she was always attentive but she didn't tell us what to do much. She gave us a lot of free rein.** She was very interested in healthy food, which back then didn't taste very good. I didn't get to taste white sliced bread until I was a teenager; I remember when I tried it for the first time I ate the whole loaf.

It was a middle-class life. I went to college in Maine and then on to get a PhD in clinical psychology in 1984. I wrote my dissertation on anxiety in test-taking settings. I guess it was because I was always anxiety-prone; I don't know why. Compared with my brothers, I was always more sensitive to social approval. I think in a way that

sensitivity helped me socially; they had a poll in the fifth grade and I was ranked the most popular boy.

But the anxiety didn't serve me; I had a particular problem with public speaking. If I had to give a speech, I was unable to do it. I literally couldn't find words and I'd tremble and sometimes I couldn't think clearly. As a psychology professional, giving speeches is something that is part of what you do. And **as a specialist on anxiety, I would be giving a speech on anxiety and I couldn't speak very well. I was afraid that everyone would think I was a fraud.**

All this time I had kept up an active meditation practice. In 1985 I joined a study group of other professionals in Boston who were also interested in mindfulness and psychotherapy. In 2006 we organized the first conference on this subject at Harvard Medical School. I knew that I would have to speak to an audience of about 500 people and I knew this would be a pretty horrifying situation. As that conference approached I was experiencing more and more panic. Then I went on a silent meditation retreat. I had a meeting with one of the teachers there and she more or less told me, 'Just sit on your cushion and love yourself. Don't think about anything else. Just love yourself'.

I followed her advice, and during the meditation retreat I started to feel pretty happy, and mindfulness came

much easier. So I started to practice like that every morning; rather than using my regular meditation, which was focused on the breath, I would just say to myself, 'May I be safe; May I be peaceful'—loving-kindness meditation.

When I was introduced at the conference a few months later, the usual terror arose. But because I had been saying these kind words to myself so often, there was a new voice in my head, which was saying, 'May I be safe; May I be peaceful'. Then I looked out over the audience and I felt so much love and warmth and affection for these people who had come to the conference, many from quite far away. Usually someone with public speaking anxiety sees the audience as the enemy, but this time I felt so warmly toward them and the fear was gone. After that my public speaking anxiety has actually never returned.

It was the introduction of self-compassion that made public speaking possible for me. I realized that when we are kind to ourselves, we immediately have this uprising of affection and care for others. **Self-compassion moved me from a state of threat into a state of care**—care for myself and care for others. It was a watershed event. So as a clinical psychologist I became very interested in self-compassion. I started to wonder what else it could do. >

PRESENT

‘I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH I’M STILL STRIVING FOR
ENLIGHTENMENT, BECAUSE I KNOW THAT GRASPING FOR IT
WILL MAKE IT NOT HAPPEN’

I have always been very curious about people and from a young age I was interested in psychology. The class in high school that I liked the most was psychology and that was the first thing I studied in college. A lot of my friends in college in the 1970s were learning Transcendental Meditation (TM), but I didn’t do it at the time because I thought it was kind of cult-like and it cost a lot of money to buy a mantra—US\$300 as I recall.

But then when I went Tübingen in southern Germany to work in a psychiatric research lab, I was really lonely and also quite anxious. There was a TM center near my apartment, so I decided to learn it. That actually changed my life because within three months, I went on a weekend retreat in the countryside where we were meditating all day long and while there, I had this ‘peak experience’ in which I heard a popping sound and kind of jumped out of my head. **There was no ‘I’; there was just complete unbounded radiant, golden light. There was no self-awareness or anything else.** It only lasted about three minutes, but it was blissful; in fact, it was more than that. I remember that there were some farmers out on the field talking to each other and also people inside the hallway of our building talking to each other. I could understand crystal clear what they were saying, simultaneously, as if I was standing next to all of them. Then my awareness started to roam over the

countryside until someone rang a bell for the end of the meditation. I could see my body in my mind’s eye, and my awareness went like oil down a funnel into the top of my head and I looked out of my own eyes, and I thought, ‘Oh, what was that?’

The whole thing felt so natural that when everyone got together to discuss stuff, I just told them. My teacher kept saying, ‘You’re kidding’, and I didn’t understand her reaction because I honestly thought everyone might be having the same experience. **I’ve never had that experience again—not in 41 years. But it set me on a path of inner exploration, on a contemplative path. My whole life is actually a psychological reflection on that brief experience.**

I’ve been married to Claire for 33 years and it’s a been a happy marriage pretty much the whole time. She’s a molecular biologist. She went to MIT and did her doctoral research with a Nobel laureate, just like Jon Kabat-Zinn did. She’s very spiritually minded and she’s gone to India with me five times, but she doesn’t sit in meditation anymore. She likes to go for long walks in the woods near our house in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

We don’t have any kids; we both decided that they would take up a lot of our time and we wanted to dedicate our time to serving others. She does a lot of work for other people, and is deeply supportive of me. She once

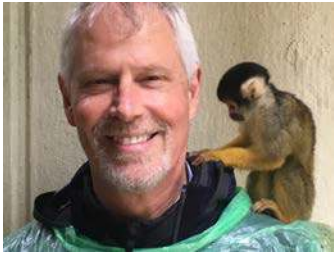
said, ‘I never, ever, want to get in the way of what you’re doing because I think it’s so good’.

I’ve meditated since 1976; now I do it for about half an hour a day. I don’t know how much I’m still striving for enlightenment because I know that grasping for it will make it not happen. Because any time you grasp for a particular mind-state in meditation, for example, you can’t reach it. You have to open. I don’t grasp so much anymore.

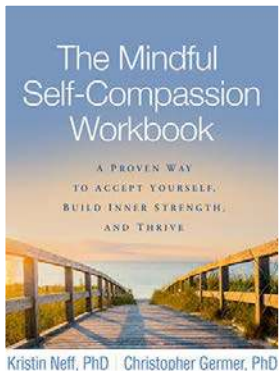
I’m 66 years old now and I consider myself ‘mentally retired’, which means I don’t need to work for money anymore so I have the privilege of doing what seems most useful. I think about a third of my life now is traveling to teach mindfulness and self-compassion. It’s taken me to every corner of the world and it will probably be what I do as long as I’m physically healthy.

I’m also helping to run an online organization called the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion. In addition to that, I’m affiliated with the Center for Mindfulness and Compassion at the Cambridge Health Alliance, Harvard Medical School, in Massachusetts. We do research and training through there. I’m also associated with the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy. Those are kind of my professional homes at the moment. >

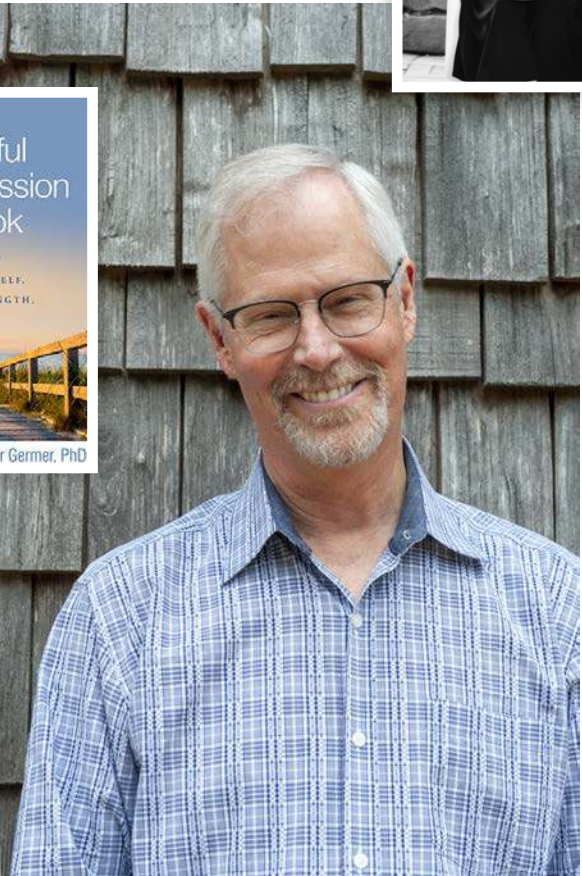
With self-compassion
research pioneer,
Kristin Neff



Our MSC teacher training team,
near Beijing, China



The book I
wrote with
Kristin



At MSC Intensive
training in the
Netherlands



A rainy day at
the monkey zoo,
with Kristin

FUTURE

**'I FEEL LIKE I'M MORE AT THE BEGINNING OF MY CAREER THAN
AT THE END, BUT I'M FORTUNATE TO HAVE THE CHOICE'**

Mindfulness is the main paradigm of contemplative practice right now; it created a great wave that has changed the way people think about everything from stress reduction to medical care. Thanks to Jon Kabat-Zinn it's been a kind of silent revolution. **Coming on the heels of mindfulness is compassion training. Compassion is closely related to mindfulness and it's going to be the next great wave.** We're at the beginning of that wave, and it's one that I'll be participating in.

Therapists have always known and assumed that compassion works, but it has been called something different by my profession: empathy. In 2009 I wrote a book called *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*, but just before that I met Kristin Neff, a pioneer in the field. I gave her a ride to a conference and we got talking. We decided to create a training program for self-compassion, Mindful Self-Compassion, along the lines of the popular Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course.

The Mindful Self-Compassion training program is growing exponentially; we now have more than 2,000 teachers around the world and we're adding teacher trainings all the time, linked to demand. And Kristin and I have also published two books: *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to Accept Yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive* and *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion Program: A Guide*

for Professionals, that describes the science, pedagogy and practices for cultivating self-compassion.

People practice self-compassion, they do research, a book comes out, new questions arise and then more research and publications... This is a big wave that is now actually starting for real. So it's very exciting for me. I feel like I'm more at the beginning of my career than at the end, but I'm fortunate to have the choice. Most of my life I was a clinical psychologist seeing one patient after another in my office and I've really cut down on the clinical practice to do self-compassion work with Kristin and everyone else.

One of the things that really interests me for the future is to look into non-ordinary states, especially psychedelics, and their use in psychological treatment. In the early 1970s research on psychedelics was shut down by the government, but research on non-ordinary states continued with contemplative practices like meditation. **Nowadays, meditation is fully integrated into the mental health field and researchers are receiving permission to take another look at psychedelics, which can have similar effects on the brain as meditation.**

Plant medicines, such as psilocybin mushrooms, are slowly becoming decriminalized and it is possible that in the next few years doctors in the US will be able to prescribe these

substances for use in therapeutic settings. Right now there are large-scale studies underway on psychedelics in the treatment of conditions like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. I think this an important new trajectory.

These days, I'm pretty much seen as the self-compassion training guy and Kristin is known for her self-compassion research. It's not just us who are doing this work, of course. **There are five empirically supported compassion training programs that I know of, and there's also a whole new model of therapy—Compassion-Focused Therapy**—which teaches people to be more self-compassionate. We're all part of this new wave of secular compassion training which is wending its way into health care, education, business and even the military. Self-compassion is going mainstream and we've got a lot of work ahead. This is the future for me, it seems. ●

INTERVIEW NINA SIEGAL PHOTOGRAPHY BONNITA POSTMA STYLING ANNE-MARIE REM

