

**“Self-love
is an
antidote for
self-pity”**

Interview with Kristin Neff
and Christopher Germer

Treating yourself with a little kindness. How hard can it be? Harder than we think. Still, it's just about the most important thing we can do. That's the message from professor and self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff and psychotherapist Christopher Germer, co-developers of a program for strengthening this crucial skill. "You need self-compassion to stay friendly with other people in the long term," says Chris. "When all you do is give and give, you get burned out."

Many people are skeptical when they first hear the term "self-compassion," because it sounds like just sitting around feeling sorry for yourself, or maybe even acting selfishly. But Kristin and Chris assure me that's not what it's about. In fact, quite the opposite. Their Mindful Self-Compassion method cultivates self-acceptance, inner strength and personal growth. They tell me about their mission to make the world happier—and explain, with great patience, the subtle differences between self-compassion, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as the importance of kindness, mindfulness and a sense of our common humanity.

Why do we need mindful self-compassion?

Kristin: "Because we're not kind and supportive to ourselves. We're much nicer to other people. When you're self-critical all the time, the inner voice in your head is always cutting you down. That undermines your ability to be happy. But in fact, we already know how to respond to failure with kindness. Imagine a friend calls you up in tears because her partner just broke up with her. Would you say, 'Well, to be honest, it's probably because you're old, ugly and boring, and because you make a needy, pushy impression on other people. And you're at least twenty pounds overweight. I don't know why you keep trying. After all, you have a snowball's chance in hell of running into someone who really loves you. You just don't deserve it.' Of course you wouldn't say something like that to someone you care about. But we do have this type of conversation with ourselves all the time in similar situations. At least two thirds of people do this, and the percentage is even higher among women. Everyone needs self-compassion in order to cope with their own pain, however slight or severe it may be. Fortunately, we can learn



to have greater compassion for ourselves."

Chris: "You also need self-compassion to stay friendly with other people in the long term. When all you do is give and give, you get burned out."

Still, many people think that self-compassion is basically self-pity and makes you passive and lazy.

Chris: "Those are just preconceived ideas. In reality, self-compassion is an antidote to self-pity. Someone who feels self-pity is always saying 'poor me;' a person with self-compassion learns that life isn't easy for anyone. Self-compassion does have the word 'self' in it, but people with self-compassion are actually less self-centered. They feel connected to others and know that everyone struggles, that we all make mistakes. In contrast, when someone with self-pity says, 'I've failed,' the focus is very much on the 'self.' Self-compassion also helps you to worry less and put things into perspective. You see yourself from the outside, so to speak, so your view of the situation is more objective. You take your suffering less personally. Instead of thinking, 'I'm suffering, and I'm the only one,' you think, 'Yes, there's suffering. I didn't ask for it, but there it is.' Compassion isn't egotistical either. Research shows that when we have compassion for ourselves, it's easier for us to have compassion for others. We actually become more caring and more helpful." Kristin: "It won't make you lazy either. Compassion involves a focus on long-term health, instead of satisfying cravings in the here and now. It's like the way a compassionate mother doesn't let her children eat ice cream all day but gives them vegetables."

We often think we won't achieve our goals unless we're very critical of ourselves.

Kristin: "Self-criticism undermines self-confidence and leads to fear of failure. Self-compassion, on the other hand, is a very reliable source of inner strength. People with self-compassion still want to achieve the same goals. Not because we'll think less of ourselves if we don't, but because we care about ourselves and want to get the most out of ourselves. So the bar is just as high. >

The only difference is that you don't run yourself down if you make a mistake, so you're less afraid to fail."

And that's good for your self-esteem?

Kristin: "Well, self-esteem involves evaluation, and that's not what you want. Self-esteem means there's a kind of inner judge telling you you're a good person—or the opposite. That often goes together with perfectionism and the idea that nothing you do is ever good enough. Self-compassion is not about judging whether you're a good person or not. It's really just a way of being kind and supportive to yourself. You acknowledge that everyone is imperfect, and that includes you. So you can always feel self-compassion, but self-esteem requires success—whether in your own judgment or someone else's."

Chris: "Some people say compassion isn't good enough for them, but 'the curious paradox,' as psychologist Carl Rogers put it, 'is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.'"

So the goal is to change?

Kristin: "Yes, there's a yin and a yang side to self-compassion. The yin is about acceptance and reassurance. The yang side is about the actions we need to take. For example, think of a child who is failing at school. A compassionate parent would never say, 'Don't worry, sweetie, failure is fine. Go ahead and fail, I love you anyway.' Compassionate parents will give a child like that unconditional love, but they'll also want the child to do better in school, because they want their child to be happy. So they look for ways of helping out."

In 2007, when you two met at a conference, Kristin had written about self-compassion before, and Chris had been giving mindfulness courses for decades. You were eager to work together right away. Why?

Kristin: "It was wonderful to combine theory, practice and all our insights about the connections between them. I had been engaged with the topic of self-compassion since 1997, when my divorce threw my life into disarray. I started exploring Buddhist meditation and learned about self-compassion exercises. I knew it was important to show compassion for others, but for myself? Wasn't that selfish? But since I wanted some peace and quiet in my head, I did the exercises, and they taught me how to be a good, helpful friend to myself when I was struggling with things. It worked! Meanwhile, I was doing academic research on self-esteem and discovering its downside: if we want to be better or more special than average, it leads to narcissism and constant comparison with others. Then I discovered that the self-compassion from my Buddhist meditations was the ideal alternative to self-esteem. I did a lot of research on this, but wasn't in touch with the practical side. Chris was. He also had a lot of experience with mindfulness, which is one of the three core elements in my definition of self-compassion—along with self-kindness and common humanity. I knew mindfulness was the first step in self-compassion."





“You learn not to attack or abandon yourself when you fall short, but to offer yourself warmth and unconditional acceptance”



You first have to be good at being here now and realize that you're struggling."

Chris: "And that's not easy to acknowledge, because we like to tell ourselves, 'I don't want to suffer.' Mindfulness helps you attend to your suffering and acknowledge that it's real. That's the basis of self-compassion. You admit that life isn't perfect, instead of getting angry at life and plotting revenge. We tend to get stuck in a 'story' about suffering and ruminate about it, instead of being able to just see suffering as suffering. Mindfulness helps to reduce tension in the moment, so that you don't get swept up in the story your head tells about your suffering."

Kristin: "The second key concept is 'self-kindness,' the quality that leads us to give ourselves the same care we give to others. You learn not to attack or abandon yourself when you fall short, but to offer yourself warmth and unconditional acceptance. The third core element is common humanity. That's the sense of being connected to everyone, the awareness that all human beings fail sometimes—and that we all suffer, as the Buddha also taught. We often fall into the trap of thinking things should go our way, that it's abnormal to fail, but of course we make mistakes, we get wrinkles and we die. Those things not only cause suffering, but can also make us feel isolated. Yet if we keep in mind that pain is part of being human, then our pain can transform into an experience of connectedness with others." >

THE COMPASSIONATE DUO

***Kristin Neff* is a professor of Human Development and Culture at the University of Texas in Austin. She studies self-compassion and wrote an earlier book called *Self-Compassion*.**

***Christopher Germer* is a clinical psychologist and psychiatry lecturer at Harvard Medical School. He has led mindfulness training programs since 1978. He wrote an earlier book called *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*.**

In 2010, they together developed the Mindful Self-Compassion Program, which 100,000 people have already attended. They have also trained 2,200 teachers around the world to offer the program.

“We practice self-kindness regularly so that one day when our heart breaks, the kindness will flow naturally”

Many people will have a hard time with this. We know that everyone suffers, but some suffer a lot more than others, and your own suffering often feels most important. It's hard to take comfort in that thought.

Chris: "Most people do find it difficult, but this attitude really is what makes the difference. You won't get it on your first try. The Mindful Self-Compassion program and workbook are full of exercises. That's because it takes a lot of practice—it's not the kind of thing you learn by thinking about it. Of course, some people suffer more deeply than others, but what can help is to realize that other people have similar emotions, that your pain is what anyone would feel if he were in your situation."

What exercise do you do when you're suffering?

Chris: "For many years, I had public speaking anxiety, and no form of therapy helped. A few months before I had to give an important speech, a meditation teacher told me just to do a loving kindness meditation. I came up with a variety of sentences that I repeated to myself. For months, I spent half an hour a day on the exercise, and I did it every time I started to panic about the lecture. They were sentences like 'May I be safe,' 'May I be happy,' and so on."

So you didn't focus on a specific problem and say, "I want my speech to go well?"

Chris: "No. I just showed some kindness to a broken person, because I was sure I would fail. But unconsciously, I was linking my panic to my friendly words. And then, right before I gave the speech, I felt not only panic, but also a friendly voice in my head: 'May I be safe. May I be happy.' It was amazing! And my speaking anxiety was gone. I was carried through it by the months of kind wishes for myself. That was years ago, but I still do the meditation daily."

Kristin: "In our program, we help the participants to come up with their own phrases. Not everyone uses them. We do lots of different exercises, and everyone uses the one that works best for them."

Is it important to practice daily?

Chris: "Yes, but it doesn't matter whether you do a particular sitting meditation or practice during your everyday activities, as long as you keep the flame burning."

You write, "What we feel, we can heal." Does the program ever stir up suppressed pain?

Chris: "Compare it to your fingers, numb with cold after you've been out in the snow. When they warm up again, they start to hurt. The same thing happens in this program. We suppress a lot of traumas, large and small, in the course of our lives. It's like numbing ourselves. But when we start to warm up our heart by giving ourselves compassion, the old pain resurfaces. Suddenly we realize we're hurting. And the same way it's good for your hands to warm them up, it's good to warm up your heart, because that's a kind of healing. Your heart opens. That's why it's important to do it slowly, step by step, and when you have big problems, to work with someone you can talk to about what comes up."

You say you should offer yourself compassion when you're struggling—not in order to feel better, but because you're not feeling good. So the point of the program is not to get rid of the pain?

Chris: "I have a metaphor for that too. Suppose your five-year-old son has the flu, and it's day one. You'll be friendly to your child and take good care of him. You won't say to yourself, 'If I'm friendly enough, then the flu will only last two days.' You know it takes five days to get over the flu. You might say we all have the flu, a lifelong flu known as human suffering. So when something goes wrong, will you say to yourself, 'This isn't supposed to happen, so I'd better do thirty-six things to solve the problem?' That obviously won't work. Or will you say what you say to your child: 'That's too bad. How sad that it went wrong and that it hurts.' Can we just be kind to ourselves and open our heart without seeing it as a strategy to get rid of the flu, or the pain? That spontaneous opening of the heart might be enough to ease the pain, whereas when we're angry and frustrated about the pain, our heart closes."

So the pain may subside, but it won't go away?

Kristin: "If all you want is for the pain to go away, then you're not accepting that the pain is there. Then you're resisting. The pain won't subside until there's less resistance—in other words, when we're kind to ourselves because it hurts."

Chris: "The friendly sentences we say to ourselves when we practice express simple intentions, such as 'I wish I were happy' or 'I wish I could love myself.' They're wishes. It's good will."

Kristin: "You don't say, 'It's not OK that I'm suffering, and I want it to be over now. Then you're resisting, and that's exactly what causes the problem. It's a subtle distinction, but an essential one.'"

Chris: "We practice self-kindness regularly so that one day when your heart breaks, the kindness will flow naturally. And that's exactly when you need it most. At that moment, you don't have to do anything else. Your self-compassion is already present, and so is your pain."

Exercises

Ready to get started with mindful self-compassion? These three exercises give you a sample of the program.



Do I have self-compassion?

The following statements describe how you relate to yourself in difficult situations. Read each one carefully before answering. For each statement, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner on a scale of 1 to 5.

A. Here is the scale for the first series of statements:

Almost never Almost always

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

- I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality that I don't like.
- When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
- I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
- When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.

- When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that most people have feelings of inadequacy sometimes.

B. For the next series of statements, use the following scale. Please note that the scale is reversed: "Almost Always" now corresponds to 1, and "Almost Never" to 5.

Almost always Almost never

① ② ③ ④ ⑤

- When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
- When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
- When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
- When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
- I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
- I'm intolerant and impatient towards aspects of my personality I don't like.

Score

Add up all your scores and divide the result by 12. An average self-compassion score is 3. You can interpret your score in relation to that. Roughly speaking, a score from

- **1 to 2.5** means you don't have much self-compassion

- **2.5 to 3.5** means you're average
- **3.5 to 5** means you have a great deal of self-compassion.

Don't worry if you have a lower self-compassion score than you would like. The great thing about self-compassion is that it's a learnable skill.



2 How would I treat a friend?

- **Close your eyes and think of times when you were fine, but a close friend was struggling with something like a failure or feelings of inadequacy. Reflect on these questions: How would you typically respond to your friend? What would you say? What tone would you use? What about your posture? Your non-verbal behavior? Write down your conclusions.**

- **Now close your eyes again and reflect on the following question: Think of times when you were struggling with something. How would you typically respond to yourself? What would you say? What tone would you use? And so on. Write down your answers.**

- **Finally, reflect on the differences between how you treat a close friend who is struggling and how you treat yourself. Do you see any patterns?**
- **Reflections: What came up for you during this exercise? Many people are shocked to realize how badly they treat themselves in comparison with their friends. If that was your experience, then you're not alone. Our culture doesn't give us much encouragement to be kind to ourselves. So we have to engage in deliberate practice to change our internal relationship with ourselves.**

3 Supportive touch

The power of physical touch is a convenient way to activate a caring response. By placing one or two hands on your body in a warm, gentle, supportive way, you can create a sense of security and soothe yourself. Different physical gestures evoke different emotional responses. In this exercise, we look for a kind of physical touch that supports you, so that you can use it to take care of yourself when you're under stress.

Find a spot where you won't be disturbed. Try the different varieties of touch described here. You may wish to close your eyes so that you can concentrate on what feels just right to you.

- **One hand on your heart**
- **Two hands on your heart**
- **Gently stroking your chest**
- **One hand around your fist over your heart**
- **One hand on your abdomen and one over your heart**
- **Two hands on your belly**
- **One hand on your cheek**
- **Holding your face in your hands**
- **Gently stroking your arms**
- **Crossing your arms and giving yourself a gentle squeeze**
- **Gently holding one hand in the other**
- **Cupping one hand in the other on your lap**

Keep experimenting until you find the type of touch that supports you best. Once you've found it, try to use it in daily life whenever you feel stress or emotional pain. By helping your body to feel safe and cherished, you make it easier for your heart and soul to feel the same way. 🌿

✳ MORE EXERCISES?

You can find the entire program, with dozens of in-depth exercises, in *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, published by the Guilford Press. The workbook covers every aspect of Neff and Germer's course, so that you can follow the program on your own.

✳ INTERESTED IN TAKING THE MINDFUL SELF-COMPASSION COURSE?

Go to centerformsc.org to find a teacher in your area.