

interview with Kristin Neff

Author of *Self-compassion: The proven power
of being kind to yourself*



**“The more we give
ourselves, the more we
have to give others”**

Parents often feel as if they are the factory and their children are the product: all their practical efforts and emotional bandwidth must be put into the service of raising kind, well-adjusted children. When they inevitably make a misstep, they feel the correct emotional response is not self-compassion but shame and frustration. As Kristin Neff argues, this pattern harms the whole family. Neff, psychologist and author of *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself* (2011), wants to dismantle the misconception that compassion for yourself compromises your capacity to be compassionate towards others.

In this interview with Elissa Strauss, guest editor of *Early Childhood Matters* and author of *When You Care* (2024), Neff talks about the emerging science about self-compassion, how self-compassion among parents is essential for the wellbeing of the whole family, and how parents already have the skills they need to intentionally and effectively be kinder to themselves.

You began studying and writing about self-compassion in 2003. What has changed since then?

When I was writing about this back in 2003, there was a lot of scepticism around the idea that how you relate to yourself in times of struggle can make a huge difference in your ability to cope. Now people realise it is one of the most powerful resilience tools we have.

At this point there have been 7,000 research studies that firmly establish the value of self-compassion. We don't need those studies, because the idea makes such intuitive sense, but I'm glad we have them.

What exactly does it mean to practise self-compassion?

Self-compassion isn't difficult. You don't need a PhD to do it. The easiest way to think about it is showing yourself the same kind of kindness, support, care and encouragement you would show to others you care about. If you know how to be a friend, you have the skills. You just have to use them for yourself. In my model, there are three elements. The first is mindfulness, or to be aware of the fact that we are struggling. We can be so focused on helping others, we don't realise we also need help.

The second is remembering our common humanity. Often when we make a mistake, we have this irrational thought that nobody else ever makes mistakes. It makes us feel as if something is wrong with us. We have the word "self" in "self-compassion" but ultimately we are reducing the sense of a separate self. It helps us to understand that making mistakes is part of the journey humans have in life, and to feel connected to others, which reduces the sense of shame.

“How you relate to yourself in times of struggle can make a huge difference in your ability to cope.”

We have to differentiate between compassion and pity. Pity is when we feel sorry for others, whereas compassion involves the understanding that we have all been there. Compassion is embedded in our humanity. We don't have to earn the right to self-compassion. When we have compassion for ourselves, we understand that it is normal to feel stress and make mistakes – everyone struggles.

The third component is self-kindness, which is about being warm and encouraging towards ourselves during hard times and using constructive rather than harsh criticism.

One easy way to get started is to simply put your hands on yourself in some supportive way. Research shows that doing this just for 20 seconds a day can increase compassion. Your body reacts to the touch as a sign of care. Or stop and breathe. Breathe in for yourself, and breathe out for your child. Put one hand on yourself, and another on your child. It is going to make you stronger.

It seems that self-compassion doesn't come easily to us. Why isn't it more common?

There is a physiological reason. When we are threatened, our stress response is fight, flight or freeze. We have an instinct to fight back by criticising ourselves, or attempting to control ourselves, as a way to protect ourselves from danger or judgement.

We either try to problem-solve, or feel stuck in self-judgement. When others such as our kids or friends are hurting, we're more likely to tap into the mammalian care response. This is why people tend to be more compassionate to others than to themselves.

How does having children impact our capacity for self-compassion?

When it comes to parents in particular, there is a belief that self-compassion is selfish. We think we have a limited amount of compassion and if we give it to ourselves we won't be able to give it to others. But this is a myth. Compassion is not zero sum, it is additive. The more we give ourselves, the more we have to give others. Once we realise that we have the template of care built into us, and we just need to direct it towards ourselves, it becomes easier.

“When it comes to parents in particular, there is a belief that self-compassion is selfish.”

How can practising self-compassion benefit parents in particular?

Parenting will inevitably bring hard moments. You make a mistake, your child is screaming, it can be overwhelming. I have an autistic kid and it was so hard to help him regulate. But in all families, moments of suffering arise. How you show up in those distressing moments will affect how you deal with them.

If you show up in a negative way, the stress is going to get worse and you are going to spiral down. If you show up as an ally towards yourself, and tell yourself this is normal, and you're doing the best you can, that attitude will help make you stronger.

And your child is going to resonate with your state. We need to remember that child wellbeing and parental wellbeing are connected. The brain evolved in such a way that even very young humans pick up on how others feel inside. If we are filled with compassion and warmth for ourselves, our children will pick up on that and feel more compassion and warmth themselves.

If your child grows up to think they have to be perfect to be a good person, is that really a gift to your child? When you take the pressure off yourself, they will get the message that they don't have to be perfect to be lovable either.

How has this played out for you as a parent?

I learned to regulate my son's emotions through the practice of self-compassion. When he had a tantrum, I learned that if I focused on soothing myself – if I filled myself up with a loving and connected presence, instead of being activated and distressed about it – he would calm down.

If you model self-compassion for them, children will learn compassion for themselves and others. Now when he's having a hard time or I'm struggling, he says things like, "It's only human." If you really love your children, self-compassion is the best gift you can give them.

What are the obstacles parents face in practising self-compassion?

Most parents understand that we should be warm, encouraging and accepting of our children, with some clear boundaries. We know that expectations and unconditional love and support are good for our kids. But we haven't gotten this message for ourselves, including the boundaries. We get stuck in a doom loop of shame and pain.

We want compassion, but we think we don't have the time or leisure to give it to ourselves. So we do this weird thing of criticising ourselves to elicit compassion from other people. And then we can't accept their compassion because we are so lost in the loop.

The culture doesn't yet get that you need self-compassion. It is starting to change a little, but it is slow progress.

How does current parenting culture make it hard for parents to find self-compassion?

Social media is often used for social comparison, not self-compassion. Social media need not be a bad thing – if we could use it to find out that all parents struggle, it could build a sense of humanity. But parents go on there and think, "How do I stack

up against that other person?” – we think they have perfect kids and they never struggle, and that can make us feel isolated and alone instead of connected.

One of the most stable research findings is that self-compassion allows you to be more authentic. You become more true to yourself, and realise that what is true for you may not be true for others, and vice versa. There is nothing wrong with going online

to find information, but ultimately you are the only one who knows what is right for you and what will work for your child.

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References

Neff, K. (2011) *Self-Compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself*. New York: William Morrow.

Strauss, E. (2024) *When You Care. The unexpected magic of caring for others*. New York: Gallery Books.