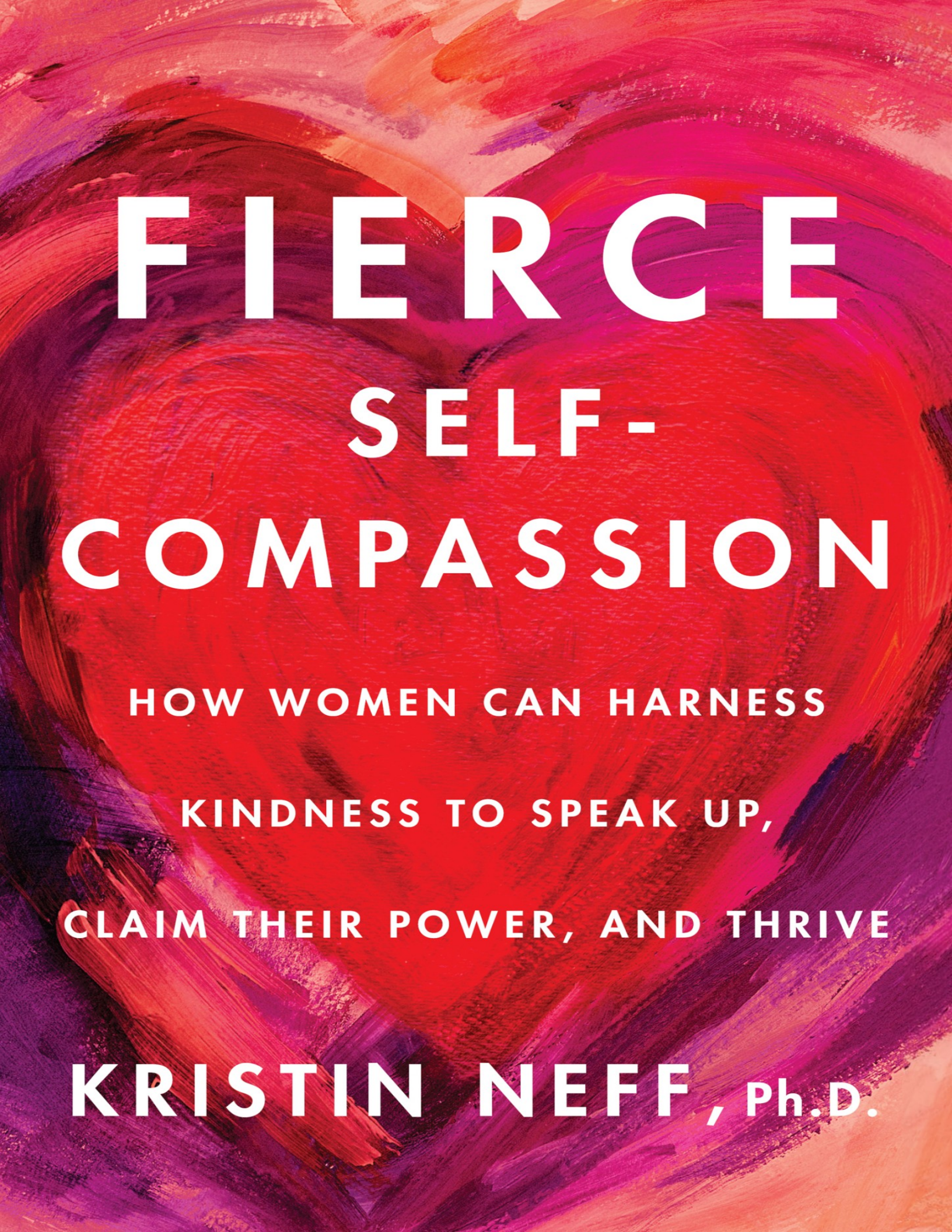
FIERCE
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HOW WOMEN CAN HARNESS
KINDNESS TO SPEAK UP,
CLAIM THEIR POWER, AND THRIVE
KRISTIN NEFF, Ph.D.

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Dedication

To my beloved son, Rowan,
and to all women everywhere

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Part I

Why Women Need Fierce Self-Compassion

Introduction

Caring Force

One thing is certain. If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then **love** becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright.

—Amanda Gorman, U.S. National Youth Poet Laureate

There's something in the air. Every woman I talk to can feel it. We're fed up, angry, and ready for change. Traditional gender roles and societal power structures restrict the ability of women to express the full range of who we are, at great cost both personally and politically. Women are allowed to be soft, nurturing, and tender. But if a woman is too fierce—if we're too angry or forceful—people get scared and call us names (witch, hag, shrew, and ball-breaker are some of the milder insults that come to mind). If we're ever going to move beyond male dominance and take our proper place at the tables of power, we need to reclaim the right to be fierce. That's how we'll make a difference in the issues facing our world today: entrenched poverty, systemic racism, a failing health-care system, and climate change, to start. This book is aimed at helping women do just that.

A valuable framework for understanding how women can make productive change is self-compassion. Compassion is aimed at alleviating suffering—it's the impulse to help, an active feeling of concern, the palpable instinct to care for those who are struggling. Although most people naturally

feel compassion for others, it's harder to direct this instinct inward. The last twenty years of my career have been devoted to researching the psychological health benefits of self-compassion and teaching people how to be kinder and more supportive toward themselves. Along with my close colleague Dr. Chris Germer, we've developed a training program called Mindful Self-Compassion that's taught around the globe. But in order to realize the full benefits of self-compassion, we need to develop both its fierce and tender side.

This is a recent realization for me. When leading self-compassion workshops in the past, I often told a funny and true story designed to illustrate how mindfulness and self-compassion can help us work with "difficult" emotions like anger.

The story goes like this: When my son Rowan was about six, I took him to see a bird show at the zoo. Once we got settled, Rowan, who's autistic, started being a bit disruptive—not screaming-and-flailing disruptive, but talking-out-loud and standing-on-rather-than-sitting-in-his-chair disruptive. The woman in front of us, her two perfectly behaved little girls sitting next to her, kept turning around to shush Rowan. Rowan wouldn't be shushed. I tried to help him keep quiet, but he was so excited he couldn't control himself. After about her third failed shooshing attempt, the woman turned around and with a crazed look in her eye exclaimed, "Will you please be quiet, we're trying to hear the show!"

Rowan was confused. He turned to me and asked in a frightened voice, "Who's that, Mommy?"

If anyone does anything at all threatening or aggressive to *my* son, I turn into Momma Bear. I was furious. So, I told him, "That's a . . ." Well, let's just say I used a word that started with "B" and it wasn't bear—you can use your imagination. The bird show ended shortly thereafter and the woman turned around to face me.

"How dare you call me that!" she said.

"How dare you give my son the evil eye!" I spat back. And we started going at it. *Two moms with their little ones by their sides, in a shouting*

match at a bird show! Luckily, I was practicing a lot of mindfulness at the time (yes, I see the irony) and said relatively calmly, "I am so angry right now." The woman responded, "Tell me something I don't know." But for me it was a pivotal moment, because instead of being lost in my rage, I was able to be mindfully aware of it, de-escalate, and leave.

It's a great teaching story because it illustrates how skills like mindfulness can help pull us back from the edge when we're being swept away by our reactive emotions. But for years I failed to fully appreciate the importance of what happened: that instinctive arising of fierce Momma Bear energy. I took for granted that moment of protective anger and assumed it was a problem when it was actually remarkable and awe-inspiring.

The Marvel Comics writer Jack Kirby was so astounded after witnessing a car accident and seeing a mother lift a three-thousand-pound vehicle to save her baby trapped underneath that it moved him to create the Incredible Hulk. This fierce aspect of our nature is far from problematic; it's a superpower. Something to be celebrated rather than merely "accepted" with mindful awareness. And not only can we use this force to protect our children, we can also use it to protect ourselves, meet our needs, motivate change, and engage in the work of justice. This book is designed to help women tap into our fierce inner warrior, so we can rise up and change our world.

CARING FORCE

Women still live in a male-dominated society, and we need all the tools we can get our hands on to emerge triumphant but also healthy and whole. One of the most powerful weapons in our arsenal is caring force. Tender self-compassion harnesses the energy of *nurturing* to alleviate suffering, while fierce self-compassion harnesses the energy of *action* to alleviate suffering—when these are fully integrated, they manifest as caring force. Our force is more effective when it's caring because it combines strength with love. This

is the message taught by great leaders of social change such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and Susan B. Anthony. It's what Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. articulated in his call to end the Vietnam War: "When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which . . . [is] the supreme unifying principle of life."

Fortunately, caring force can be turned inward as well as outward. We can use it to propel our personal journey of growth and healing at the same time that we fight for justice. After all, social activism is an act of self-compassion (not just other-compassion) because we're all interconnected, and injustice impacts us all.

Although I used to believe my own fierceness was a character flaw I needed to overcome, I now realize it's what has allowed me to succeed in life. In 2003, I published the first theoretical paper defining self-compassion, and I created the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) the same year to measure it. My initial studies demonstrated that people who score higher on the SCS have greater levels of well-being. While for the first few years I was the primary person conducting research on self-compassion, since then the field has exploded and now includes well over three thousand scientific journal articles, with new studies being published daily. I doubt I would've had the courage to enter this uncharted territory without the same warrior energy that sometimes gets me into trouble (like calling a complete stranger names in front of my child at a bird show).

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Unpacking the fierce as well as tender sides of self-compassion is the latest development in my work, and something I've yet to write extensively about. At the same time, it draws on threads that have run throughout my career. I did my Ph.D. in the area of moral development with a scholar named Elliot Turiel at the University of California, Berkeley. He'd been a student of

Lawrence Kohlberg, the famous theorist who proposed that morality developed through three main stages. According to Kohlberg's model, the first stage (occurring in childhood) focuses on meeting personal needs, the second stage (found in adolescence) focuses on care and meeting the needs of others, and the final stage (reached in adulthood if at all) focuses on justice and equitably considers everyone's rights and needs. Kohlberg's research, conducted mainly in the 1960s, found that women tended to make moral decisions based on care, whereas men more often made decisions based on rights and justice. This was interpreted to mean that women were less advanced moral thinkers than men.

Many feminists were rightfully angered by this position and saw it as biased. Carol Gilligan, author of the influential book *In a Different Voice*, countered that care and justice were two different ethical lenses through which one can see the world. A woman's way of knowing was connected, rather than autonomous, but not inferior to a male perspective. Although her theory was intended to thwart the view that women were less moral than men, it ironically portrayed women as not valuing justice!

I disagree with both these positions, finding each of them sexist in their own way. Turiel resolved the argument by demonstrating that males and females at all stages of development make moral judgments based on autonomy, care, and justice depending on the context. Almost everyone, regardless of age, gender, or culture, judges that it's better to care for and help rather than harm others, that people should be able to make autonomous decisions about certain personal issues, and that justice matters. In fact, one of the first moral judgments little kids make is "that's not fair!" Turiel's research also shows that social power plays an important role in how each type of reasoning is expressed. Dominance grants more autonomous decision-making, and subordination demands more care for others. By definition, a central feature of having power is the ability to do what you want, and part of what defines subordination is having to meet the needs of those with power. Equal power is necessary to ensure that everyone's needs are considered fairly. I spent a year in India to conduct my

dissertation research on how culturally embedded beliefs about gender hierarchy influence reasoning about these issues in marital conflicts (more on this later).

It was only after returning to Berkeley to write up my dissertation that I learned about self-compassion. As I wrote about extensively in my first book *Self-Compassion*, my journey to self-kindness was a painful one. Just before embarking on my research abroad, I left my husband for another man (much to my horror and shame given that I considered myself a highly caring and moral person), who was supposed to join me in India. But that man didn't leave his partner for me and never showed up. Not only that, when I came home I found out he'd developed brain cancer and died shortly after my return.

I wanted to learn meditation as a way of picking up the pieces of my shattered life. I started practicing with a group that followed the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Master who emphasizes the need to be compassionate to ourselves as well as others. I read books by pioneering Western Buddhist teachers, like Sharon Salzberg's *Lovingkindness* and Jack Kornfield's *A Path with Heart*, which also stress the importance of including ourselves in the circle of compassion.

As a result of my reading and meditation practice, I tried to be warmer to myself and more supportive. Instead of beating myself up about what I'd done—just so I could convince myself I was a good person for hating what a bad person I'd been; this is how convoluted the mind gets—I tried to be more understanding and forgiving. Admittedly it was a bit awkward at first. When I tried telling myself, "Human beings make mistakes," another voice would pop up and say, "You're just making excuses." But eventually the voice of objection quieted, as I learned to acknowledge the pain of the harm I'd caused while being kind in the process. I told myself, "I know you would have done it differently if you could have, but you weren't capable at the time. You were frustrated in your marriage and were trying to find happiness. Everyone wants to be happy." Rather than obsessing about myself and my misdeeds, I began to appreciate my imperfect humanity and

the way it connected me to the larger whole. I would put my hands on my heart and say, “I know you’re hurting, but it will be okay. I accept you exactly as you are, flaws and all.” Doing so allowed me to take full responsibility for what I’d done, painful as it was, without flagellating myself in the process. With practice, I learned how to hold my shame with love, and it radically changed my life for the better.

After graduating, I did two years of postdoctoral study with a professor at the University of Denver named Susan Harter who was one of the country’s leading researchers on self-esteem, a concept that had dominated psychologists’ conceptions of well-being for decades. Self-esteem can be defined as a positive evaluation of self-worth. Researchers were starting to understand that although judging yourself positively makes you happier, it can lead people into traps and dead ends like narcissism and continual comparison with others. Furthermore, self-esteem too often depends on social approval, or looking attractive, or succeeding rather than failing. Self-esteem is a fair-weather friend. It’s there when things go well but deserts you when things go badly, just when you need it most. Self-compassion is a perfect alternative to self-esteem. It doesn’t require feeling better than others, it isn’t contingent on other people liking you, and it doesn’t require getting things right. All you need to have self-compassion is to be a flawed human being like everyone else. It’s a constant source of support and refuge.

When I took a faculty position at the University of Texas at Austin, I initially continued my research on how power impacts autonomy, care, and justice in relationships. But I was also developing my ideas on self-compassion and wrote about it as a healthier alternative to self-esteem. I became so enthralled with self-compassion that I dropped all other lines of study; it’s been my primary focus ever since. Only recently have I revisited my early research interests in the context of self-compassion. When we relate to ourselves with tender self-compassion, we care for and nurture ourselves. When we relate to ourselves with fierce self-compassion, we assert our autonomy and stand up for our rights. When fierce and tender self-compassion are balanced, we can be fair and just. Power and gender

expectations also play a role in the expression of self-compassion, with male dominance emphasizing fierceness, female subordination emphasizing tenderness, and the drive for gender equality demanding that we integrate both. The previously disparate lines of my work have now come together, like puzzle pieces clicking into place.

WHY THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN FOR WOMEN, AND WHY NOW

Self-compassion is useful for anyone, and most of what I've written about in the past has been gender neutral. But I believe that self-compassion is especially necessary for women at this moment in history. Women have had it with mansplaining and being treated as if we were incompetent. It's time for us to be paid fairly and to have equal power and representation as national leaders in business and government. Fierce self-compassion, especially when balanced with tender self-compassion, can help us fight for our rights and counter the harm done by centuries of being told to keep quiet and look pretty.

I was also inspired to write this book as a consequence of the #MeToo movement. For far too long women swept sexual harassment and abuse under the rug. We feared people wouldn't believe us if we revealed the truth. It would bring shame upon us, or it would only cause more harm. But this changed in 2017 as hundreds of thousands of women used the hashtag #MeToo to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Suddenly, the men were the ones leaving their jobs with their reputations in ruin.

As I will discuss in detail later, my story resonates with those of countless other women around the globe. Despite being a well-known mindfulness and compassion teacher, I was fooled and manipulated by someone who turned out to be a sex predator. A man I trusted and supported was actually harassing and abusing countless women without my knowledge. My self-compassion practice is what allowed me to cope with the horror of revelation

after revelation. Tender self-compassion helped me to heal, and fierce self-compassion spurred me to speak up and commit to not letting the harm continue.

The women's movement gave us access to the professional realm, but to succeed in it we've needed to act like men, suppressing tender qualities that are devalued in a man's world. At the same time, we're disliked for being too aggressive or assertive. This leaves us with a false choice: to succeed and be scorned or to be liked and remain disempowered. Women have more pressure to prove ourselves at work, but are also subject to sexual harassment and lower pay. The bottom line is this: the current setup isn't working for us anymore. I believe that by developing and integrating fierce and tender self-compassion, women will be better equipped to realize our true selves and make needed changes to the world around us. Patriarchy is still alive and causing great harm. We're being called by the pressing issues of the day—sexual harassment, pay inequality, rampant prejudice, health disparities, political division, our dying planet—to claim our power and take action.

Because I'm a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman, undoubtedly there will be unconscious biases in what I write. Although I'll try as best I can to address the diverse experience of people who identify as women, my efforts will surely fall short. Please forgive me. It's my hope that this book will lay out general principles that can speak to the experience of people with differing intersections of identities in a meaningful way. All women are not the same and all suffering is not the same. But I believe that fierce and tender self-compassion are relevant to all people and are key to the fight against sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression.

SELF-COMPASSION AS A PRACTICE

Self-compassion isn't just a good idea. It's something we can *do*. We can train our brains and build new habits to respond to our mental, physical, and emotional pain with compassion. Research shows not only that we can learn to be more self-compassionate, but that it radically changes our lives for the better. This book will introduce concepts, discuss research, and help you develop both tender and fierce self-compassion. It will teach you how to combine them to create a caring force that can be used in key areas of your life like relationships, caregiving, and work.

Throughout the book I'll provide tools to help you understand what you're reading firsthand. Sometimes I'll present empirically validated assessments of traits such as self-compassion, gender stereotypes, or relationship styles that are commonly used in research, so you can conduct that same research on yourself! I'll also include concrete exercises to help you develop your self-compassion muscles. (Guided audio versions of many of these practices are available at FierceSelf-Compassion.org.) And while there will be a few meditations, this is not a meditation guide. I'm not a spiritual teacher, I'm a scientist, but when self-compassion goes deep it can be a spiritual experience.

Most of the practices included in this book are adapted from the empirically supported Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program that I developed with Chris Germer. You can take an MSC course online at www.CenterforMSC.org or go through the program yourself using *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook*. MSC isn't therapy, but it can be highly therapeutic. Rather than focusing on healing particular wounds from the past, MSC helps us adopt a more self-compassionate approach to everyday life. In an early study of the effectiveness of MSC, we found that eight weeks of training led to a 43 percent increase in self-compassion. Participants reported they were also more mindful and compassionate to others; less depressed, anxious, stressed, and emotionally avoidant; as well as happier and more satisfied with their lives. Most significantly, the resource of self-compassion was a steady friend from then on. The increased self-

compassion and improved well-being gained from MSC was demonstrated to last for at least a year.

The amount that people benefitted from the program was also linked to how much they practiced. For this reason, I encourage you to practice self-compassion intentionally for at least twenty minutes per day. Although research shows that these self-compassion tools work, the only way you'll know for sure is if you give them a try.

TEST YOUR LEVEL OF SELF-COMPASSION

If you want to get a sense of how self-compassionate you are, you can fill out this brief version of the Self-Compassion Scale that is used in most self-compassion research. For fun, you may want to record your score now and then take the SCS again after finishing the book to see if your level of self-compassion has changed. You'll notice that the SCS does not differentiate between fierce and tender self-compassion. While I might refine the scale to reflect these two sides of self-compassion in the future, currently the SCS is a general measure of the trait.

Instructions

Please read each statement carefully before answering. To the left of each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner. Answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience *should* be.

For the first set of items, use the following scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), or some point in between:

_____ I try to be understanding and patient toward those aspects of my personality 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 feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.

For the next items, use a scale from 1 (almost always) to 5 (almost never), or some point in between. Notice that the scoring system has been reversed, so that higher scores indicate lessened frequency:

_____ 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 toward those aspects of my personality I don't like.

Total (sum of all 12 items) = _____