

10th anniversary edition with a new foreword

Self- Compassion

the proven power
of being kind
to yourself



'A transformative read'
Brené Brown

KRISTIN NEFF, PhD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristin Neff is an associate professor in human development at the University of Texas at Austin. A pioneer who first established self compassion as a field of study almost a decade ago, Dr. Neff gives lectures on self compassion internationally and conducts workshops for those who want to learn more about developing self compassion.

www.selfcompassion.org

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The proven power of being kind to yourself

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To Rowan

For the joy, wonder, love, and inspiration you give me

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FOREWORD

It's been a decade since *Self-Compassion* was first published in 2011. People were less familiar with self-compassion then, and many were somewhat suspicious of it. I was often asked, won't being nice to myself make me weak, selfish, or lazy? Luckily, things have moved forward, and self-compassion is more commonly spoken of as an important mental health resource, partly due to the exponential increase in research on its benefits. As I write, there are over 3500 published journal articles, theses and books on the topic, with new research emerging every day (much of which can be found at www.self-compassion.org). There are hundreds of studies showing that self-compassion doesn't make you weak; in fact, it's an incredibly powerful source of strength, coping, and resilience. It's not selfish, it leads to more giving and caring relationship behavior, and allows us to sustain giving to others without becoming drained. And far from making us lazy, self-compassion is like rocket fuel for getting things done, keeping us focused on our goals, reducing performance anxiety, and most importantly, allowing us to learn from our mistakes, so we can grow from them.

Self-compassion involves treating ourselves with the same warmth, care, and concern that we'd naturally show to a good friend. Research has found that self-compassionate people were better able to cope with the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic: they were less fearful and lonely, more satisfied with their lives, and could still parent their kids effectively, despite the stress of working and schooling from home. The benefits of self-compassion have been proven in many realms – reducing burnout in teachers and healthcare providers, creating more functional relationships, helping athletes bounce back from setbacks, enhancing engagement in the workplace, lessening the traumatic aftermath of combat or cancer, and motivating commitment to fighting social injustice. The ever-expanding body of research on self-compassion shows it can radically transform our lives for the better.

Self-compassion is something we can all actually do. When *Self-Compassion* was first published, my colleague Chris Germer and I were developing the 8-week training program called Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC). We co-founded the nonprofit Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (www.CenterforMSC.org) to teach it and to train MSC teachers. There are now approximately 2500 MSC teachers internationally (in every continent except Antarctica) and well over 150,000 people have taken the program worldwide. We've also adapted it to meet the needs of particular groups such as adolescents, young adults, parents, couples, athletes, educators, psychotherapists, and healthcare workers. Studies show that MSC increases self-compassion as well as compassion for others, mindfulness, mental well-being, emotional resilience, and physical health (one study with diabetes patients found it reduced glucose levels). We co-wrote two books on MSC – *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* and *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion Program: A Guide for Professionals* – so people could access the practices more easily. It's an incredibly exciting time in the self-compassion world, and I feel honored to be involved in creating practical tools to help people relate to their struggles in a more caring and effective manner.

My current work focuses on exploring the fierce and tender sides of this resilient mindset. Tender self-compassion involves “being with” ourselves in a compassionate way, just as a parent might be with a child in distress: comforting, reassuring, and validating their pain. It offers unconditional self-acceptance rather than merciless self-criticism. But sometimes self-compassion is more like a powerful momma bear than a gentle mother. Fierce self-compassion takes action to protect, provide, and motivate ourselves. It says “no” to others who are hurting us, drawing our boundaries firmly. It gives us what we genuinely need – mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually – without subordinating our needs to those of others, so we can be authentic and fulfilled. And it spurs us on to make necessary changes in our lives and in society to reduce suffering. My most recent book, *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive*, helps women to claim their fierce nature (often stifled by gender roles), so they can succeed in the workplace, care for others without losing themselves, and thrive in their personal lives.

But it all started with *Self-Compassion*, my first in-depth dive into the transformative impact of opening our hearts to ourselves. In these pages you will read about my son Rowan, who is autistic and was about nine when it was released. His symptoms were more severe then, providing me with many life lessons about how self-compassion can help us through challenging moments, coming out the better for it. Rowan and I now live in Austin, Texas. He goes to an excellent high school known for its autism program and will graduate in 2022. He's flourished in this new setting, responding to change remarkably well (especially for someone on the spectrum). Rowan coped with my divorce from his father and gracefully navigated the switch from being homeschooled to learning in a large public school, even when things were shut down during the pandemic. He recently got his driver's license, and we just took a 2000-mile road trip, Rowan passing big rigs on the Interstate as if he were born for it. I like to think that the ethos of self-compassion accompanying his every move while growing up helped him become the amazingly resilient, responsible, charming, kind, and articulate young man he is today.

As for me, I'm taking the practice of self-compassion more seriously than ever. I'm currently single, and while open to finding love again, I'm fully dedicated to ensuring my happiness isn't dependent on having a partner. I'm learning to give myself those things I've been told must come from another: love, support, care, feeling valued, commitment. I see clearly that connection is primarily to be found within. We give away our power when we outsource our need for love and compassion, and we claim our rightful place in the scheme of things when we give ourselves what we truly need and treat ourselves with the kindness we deserve. And so, I can honestly say that I'm happier now than I've ever been.

I hope that as you read this book and do the practice, you'll receive the gift of your own compassion and reap its benefits. If you make self-compassion part of your daily life – responding in a more supportive way to everyday moments of fear, failure, sadness, or insecurity – you will see the transformation almost immediately. I wish you well on your journey.

Kristin Neff
Austin, April 2021

Part One



WHY SELF-COMPASSION?

Chapter One

DISCOVERING SELF-COMPASSION

This kind of compulsive concern with “I, me, and mine” isn’t the same as loving ourselves ... Loving ourselves points us to capacities of resilience, compassion, and understanding within that are simply part of being alive.

—SHARON SALZBERG, *The Force of Kindness*

IN THIS INCREDIBLY COMPETITIVE SOCIETY OF OURS, HOW MANY OF us truly feel good about ourselves? It seems such a fleeting thing—feeling good—especially as we need to feel *special and above average* to feel worthy. Anything less seems like a failure. I remember once as a freshman in college, after spending hours getting ready for a big party, I complained to my boyfriend that my hair, makeup, and outfit were woefully inadequate. He tried to reassure me by saying, “Don’t worry, you look fine.”

“Fine? Oh great, I always wanted to look fine ...”

The desire to feel special is understandable. The problem is that by definition, it’s impossible for *everyone* to be above average at the same time. Although there are some ways in which we excel, there is always someone smarter, prettier, more successful. How do we cope with this? Not very well. To see ourselves positively, we tend to inflate our own egos and put others down so that we can feel good in comparison. But this strategy comes at a price—it holds us back from reaching our full potential in life.

Distorting Mirrors

If I have to feel better than you to feel good about myself, then how clearly am I really going to see you, or myself for that matter? Let's say I had a stressful day at work and am grumpy and irritable with my husband when he gets home later that evening (purely hypothetical, of course). If I'm highly invested in having a positive self-image and don't want to risk viewing myself in a negative light, I'm going to slant my interpretation of what transpires to make sure that any friction between us is seen as my husband's fault, not my own.

"GOOD, YOU'RE HOME. DID YOU PICK UP THE GROCERIES LIKE I ASKED?"

"I JUST WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, HOW ABOUT 'NICE TO SEE YOU, DEAR, HOW WAS YOUR DAY?' "

"WELL, IF *you* WEREN'T SO FORGETFUL, MAYBE I WOULDN'T HAVE TO ALWAYS HOUND YOU."

"AS A MATTER OF FACT, I DID PICK UP THE GROCERIES."

"OH ... WELL, UM ... IT'S THE EXCEPTION THAT PROVES THE RULE. I WISH YOU WEREN'T SO UNRELIABLE."

Not exactly a recipe for happiness.

Why is it so hard to admit when we step out of line, are rude, or act impatient? Because our ego feels so much better when we project our flaws and shortcomings on to someone else. *It's your fault, not mine.* Just think about all the arguments and fights that grow out of this simple dynamic. Each person blames the other for saying or doing something wrong, justifying their own actions as if their life depended on it, while both know, in their heart of hearts, that it takes two to tango. How much time do we waste like this? Wouldn't it be so much better if we could just fess up and play fair?

But change is easier said than done. It's almost impossible to notice those aspects of ourselves that cause problems relating to others, or that keep us from reaching our full potential, if we can't see ourselves clearly. How can we grow if we can't acknowledge our own weaknesses? We might *temporarily*

feel better about ourselves by ignoring our flaws, or by believing our issues and difficulties are somebody else's fault, but in the long run we only harm ourselves by getting stuck in endless cycles of stagnation and conflict.

The Costs of Self-Judgment

Continually feeding our need for positive self-evaluation is a bit like stuffing ourselves with candy. We get a brief sugar high, then a crash. And right after the crash comes a pendulum swing to despair as we realize that—however much we'd like to—we can't always blame our problems on someone else. We can't always feel special and above average. The result is often devastating. We look in the mirror and don't like what we see (both literally and figuratively), and the shame starts to set in. Most of us are incredibly hard on ourselves when we finally admit some flaw or shortcoming. "I'm not good enough. I'm worthless." It's not surprising that we hide the truth from ourselves when honesty is met with such harsh condemnation.

In areas where it is hard to fool ourselves—when comparing our weight to those of magazine models, for instance, or our bank accounts to those of the rich and successful—we cause ourselves incredible amounts of emotional pain. We lose faith in ourselves, start doubting our potential, and become hopeless. Of course, this sorry state just yields more self-condemnation for being such a do-nothing loser, and down, down we go.

Even if we do manage to get our act together, the goalposts for what counts as "good enough" seem always to remain frustratingly out of reach. We must be smart *and* fit *and* fashionable *and* interesting *and* successful *and* sexy. Oh, and spiritual, too. And no matter how well we do, someone else always seems to be doing it better. The result of this line of thinking is sobering: millions of people need to take pharmaceuticals every day just to cope with daily life. Insecurity, anxiety, and depression are incredibly common in our society, and much of this is due to self-judgment, to beating ourselves up when we feel we aren't winning in the game of life.

Another Way

So what's the answer? *To stop judging and evaluating ourselves altogether.* To stop trying to label ourselves as “good” or “bad” and simply accept ourselves with an open heart. To treat ourselves with the same kindness, caring, and compassion we would show to a good friend, or even a stranger for that matter. Sadly, however, there's almost no one whom we treat as badly as ourselves.

When I first came across the idea of self-compassion, it changed my life almost immediately. It was during my last year in the Human Development doctoral program at the University of California at Berkeley, as I was putting the finishing touches on my dissertation. I was going through a really difficult time following the breakup of my first marriage, and I was full of shame and self-loathing. I thought signing up for meditation classes at a local Buddhist center might help. I had been interested in Eastern spirituality from the time I was a small child, having been raised by an open-minded mother just outside of Los Angeles. But I had never taken meditation seriously. I had also never examined Buddhist philosophy, as my exposure to Eastern thought had been more along California New Age lines. As part of my exploration, I read Sharon Salzberg's classic book *Lovingkindness* and was never the same again.

I had known that Buddhists talk a lot about the importance of compassion, but I had never considered that having compassion for *yourself* might be as important as having compassion for others. From the Buddhist point of view, you have to care about yourself before you can really care about other people. If you are continually judging and criticizing yourself while trying to be kind to others, you are drawing artificial boundaries and distinctions that only lead to feelings of separation and isolation. This is the opposite of oneness, interconnection, and universal love—the ultimate goal of most spiritual paths, no matter which tradition.

I remember talking to my new fiancé, Rupert, who joined me for the weekly Buddhist group meetings, and shaking my head in amazement. “You mean you're actually allowed to be *nice* to yourself, to have compassion for yourself when you mess up or are going through a really hard time? I don't know ... If I'm too self-compassionate, won't I just be lazy and selfish?” It took me a while to get my head around it. But I slowly came to realize that self-criticism—despite being socially sanctioned—was not at all helpful, and in fact only made things worse. I wasn't making myself a better person by beating myself up all the time. Instead, I was causing myself to feel

inadequate and insecure, then taking out my frustration on the people closest to me. More than that, I wasn't owning up to many things because I was so afraid of the self-hate that would follow if I admitted the truth.

What Rupert and I both came to learn was that instead of relying on our relationship to meet all our needs for love, acceptance, and security, we could actually provide some of these feelings for *ourselves*. And this would mean that we had even more in our hearts to give to each other. We were both so moved by the concept of self-compassion that in our marriage ceremony later that year, each of us ended our vows by saying "Most of all, I promise to help you have compassion for yourself, so that you can thrive and be happy."

After getting my Ph.D., I did two years of postdoctoral training with a leading self-esteem researcher. I wanted to know more about how people determine their sense of self-worth. I quickly learned that the field of psychology was falling out of love with self-esteem as the ultimate marker of positive mental health. Although thousands of articles had been written on the importance of self-esteem, researchers were now starting to point out all the traps that people can fall into when they try to get and keep a sense of high self-esteem: narcissism, self-absorption, self-righteous anger, prejudice, discrimination, and so on. I realized that self-compassion was the perfect alternative to the relentless pursuit of self-esteem. Why? Because it offers the same protection against harsh self-criticism as self-esteem, but without the need to see ourselves as perfect or as better than others. *In other words, self-compassion provides the same benefits as high self-esteem without its drawbacks.*

When I got a job as an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, I decided that as soon as I got settled I would conduct research on self-compassion. Although no one had yet defined self-compassion from an academic perspective—let alone done any research on it—I knew that this would be my life's work.

So what is self-compassion? What does it mean exactly? I usually find that the best way to describe self-compassion is to start with a more familiar experience—compassion for others. After all, compassion is the same whether we direct it to ourselves or to other people.

Compassion for Others

Imagine you're stuck in traffic on the way to work, and a homeless man tries to get you to pay him a buck for washing your car windows. *He's so pushy!* you think to yourself. *He'll make me miss the light and be late. He probably just wants the money for booze or drugs anyway. Maybe if I ignore him, he'll just leave me alone.* But he doesn't ignore you, and you sit there hating him while he washes your window, feeling guilty if you don't toss him some money, resentful if you do.

Then one day, you're struck as if by lightning. There you are in the same commuter traffic, at the same light, at the same time, and there's the homeless man, with his bucket and squeegee as usual. Yet for some unknown reason, today you see him differently. You see him as a *person* rather than just a mere annoyance. You notice his suffering. *How does he survive? Most people just shoo him away. He's out here in the traffic and fumes all day and certainly isn't earning much. At least he's trying to offer something in return for the cash. It must be really tough to have people be so irritated with you all the time. I wonder what his story is? How he ended up on the streets?* The moment you see the man as an actual human being who is suffering, your heart connects with him. Instead of ignoring him, you find—to your amazement—that you're taking a moment to think about how difficult his life is. You are moved by his pain and feel the urge to help him in some way. Importantly, if what you feel is true compassion rather than mere pity, you say to yourself, *There but for the grace of God go I. If I'd been born in different circumstances, or maybe had just been unlucky, I might also be struggling to survive like that. We're all vulnerable.*

Of course, that might be the moment when you harden your heart completely—your own fear of ending up on the street causing you to dehumanize this horrid heap of rags and beard. Many people do. But it doesn't make them happy; it doesn't help them deal with the stresses of their work, their spouse, or their child when they get home. It doesn't help them face their own fears. If anything, this hardening of the heart, which involves feeling *better* than the homeless man, just makes the whole thing that little bit worse.

But let's say you don't close up. Let's say you really do experience compassion for the homeless man's misfortune. How does it feel? Actually, it feels pretty good. It's wonderful when your heart opens—you immediately feel more connected, alive, present.

Now, let's say the man wasn't trying to wash windows in return for some cash. Maybe he *was* just begging for money to buy alcohol or drugs—should you still feel compassion for him? Yes. You don't have to invite him home. You don't even have to give him a buck. You may decide to give him a kind smile or a sandwich rather than money if you feel that's the more responsible thing to do. But yes, he is still worthy of compassion—all of us are. Compassion is not only relevant to those who are blameless victims, but also to those whose suffering stems from failures, personal weakness, or bad decisions. You know, the kind you and I make every day.

Compassion, then, involves the recognition and clear seeing of suffering. It also involves feelings of kindness for people who are suffering, so that the desire to help—to *ameliorate suffering*—emerges. Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is.

Compassion for Ourselves

Self-compassion, by definition, involves the same qualities. First, it requires that we stop to recognize our own suffering. We can't be moved by our own pain if we don't even acknowledge that it exists in the first place. Of course, sometimes the fact that we're in pain is blindingly obvious and we can think of nothing else. More often than you might think, however, we *don't* recognize when we are suffering. Much of Western culture has a strong "stiff-upper-lip" tradition. We are taught that we shouldn't complain, that we should just *carry on* (to be read in a clipped British accent while giving a smart salute). If we're in a difficult or stressful situation, we rarely take the time to step back and recognize how hard it is for us in the moment.

And when our pain comes from self-judgment—if you're angry at yourself for mistreating someone, or for making some stupid remark at a party—it's even harder to see these as moments of suffering. Like the time I asked a friend I hadn't seen in a while, eyeing the bump of her belly, "Are we expecting?" "Er, no," she answered, "I've just put on some weight lately." "Oh

...” I said as my face turned beet red. We typically don’t recognize such moments as a type of pain that is worthy of a compassionate response. After all, I messed up, doesn’t that mean I should be punished? Well, do you punish your friends or your family when they mess up? Okay, maybe sometimes a little, but do you feel good about it?

Everybody makes mistakes at one time or another, it’s a fact of life. And if you think about it, why should you expect anything different? Where is that written contract you signed before birth promising that you’d be perfect, that you’d never fail, and that your life would go absolutely the way you want it to? *Uh, excuse me. There must be some error. I signed up for the “everything will go swimmingly until the day I die” plan. Can I speak to the management, please?* It’s absurd, and yet most of us act as if something has gone terribly awry when we fall down or life takes an unwanted or unexpected turn.

One of the downsides of living in a culture that stresses the ethic of independence and individual achievement is that if we don’t continually reach our ideal goals, we feel that we only have ourselves to blame. And if we’re at fault, that means we don’t deserve compassion, right? The truth is, *everyone* is worthy of compassion. The very fact that we are conscious human beings experiencing life on the planet means that we are intrinsically valuable and deserving of care. According to the Dalai Lama, “Human beings by nature want happiness and do not want suffering. With that feeling everyone tries to achieve happiness and tries to get rid of suffering, and everyone has the basic right to do this. ... Basically, from the viewpoint of real human value we are all the same.” This is the same sentiment, of course, that inspired the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” We don’t have to earn the right to compassion; it is our birthright. We are human, and our ability to think and feel, combined with our desire to be happy rather than to suffer, warrants compassion for its own sake.

Many people are resistant to the idea of self-compassion, however. Isn’t it really just a form of self-pity? Or a dressed-up word for self-indulgence? I will show throughout this book that these assumptions are false and run directly counter to the actual meaning of self-compassion. As you’ll come to see, self-compassion involves wanting health and well-being for oneself and