

## Self-Compassion

A Dialogue with Dr. Kristin Neff and Acharya Fleet Maull

[0:00:08.5] Acharya Fleet Maull: Hi, Acharya Fleet Maull here for Shambhala Mountain Centre, and we're on day four of the Science of Meditation conference, and today is focused on self-compassion and loving kindness and we're here with Doctor Kristin Neff, who's really one of the leading authorities on self-compassion. Welcome, Kristin.

[0:00:34.3] Dr. Kristin Neff: Hi Fleet, thanks for having me on.

[0:00:37.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: So I want to let the audience know that you can see Doctor Neff's complete bio down below the video stream here and but I want to hit you with a few highlights, so Doctor Neff was one of the first who created an operational definition for self-compassion and to begin doing research like that and later co-created with her colleague, Doctor Chris Germer a program called Mindful Self-Compassion or MSC, her book Self-Compassion was published by William Morrow in 2011. So maybe we could start Kristin, by you kind of telling us how you got into this research on self-compassion.

[0:01:17.8] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yeah, so well it actually did start my last year of graduate school at UC Berkeley. I was under a lot of stress, I've gotten out of a divorce, I was stressed about finishing my PhD, would I get a job after finishing, and so I decided to learn how to meditate, right, and I was in Berkeley, so there were many meditation groups available to me. And to my great surprise the first meditation group I went to, the woman leading the group talked about the importance of self-compassion. You know I was expecting her to talk mainly about mindfulness meditation, but this particular teacher was very inspirational about the importance of helping ourselves emotionally, and to be a good friend to ourselves, so I started practicing self-compassion as part of my Buddhist practice and then I saw what an amazing transformation in made in my own life and then later when I got to UT Austin, I kind of decided I wanted to do research on it and see if I could prove what I already knew which is that self-compassion is a really great source of wellbeing and coping and resilience.

[0:02:30.5] Acharya Fleet Maull: Well maybe we could start by what inspires I think a lot of us to be inclined towards practicing self-compassion, is that we find ourselves being pretty self-judgmental and self-critical, it seems to be I don't know whether it's in our DNA, it's certainly in the culture. Maybe we could talk a little about that to begin with, talk a little bit about the problem before we get more into the answer?

[0:02:55.0] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yeah, so actually our research shows most people are much more critical of themselves than they are really of anyone else in their lives and they're much less compassionate to themselves than they are to the people they care about, so it does seem to be a common pattern. I think, we know there's some cultural variation in how self-compassionate people are, but in general human beings can be pretty self-critical and I think that's because when we fail or we make a mistake or we feel inadequate in some way, we feel threatened. So we go into threat defence mode which is fight, flight or freeze, and then what happens with ourselves is we fight ourselves trying to get rid of the problem or we flee into shame and isolation or else we get stuck in rumination in our heads as part of the freeze response, so I think in some ways the fact that we're self-critical is a natural human response, but luckily it's not the only response we have available to us and self-compassion's another way to help us feel safe, it's a lot more productive.

[0:04:03.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: Sometimes I think, maybe in the general population as well as in you know kind of popular press and different publications and so forth the notion of self-compassion can be confused with self-esteem, and the research on self-

esteem has not been great, I know from our prison work, self-esteem based programs have not fared well in research, so could you make a distinction between those two things?

[0:04:31.8] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yeah, in fact that's one of the things that inspired me to start doing research on self-compassion. I actually did a two year post-doc at the University of Denver, kind of nearby Susan Harper, who was one of the country's leading self-esteem researchers and then became very familiar with all the problems with self-esteem. I mean there's not a problem having self-esteem, you want high self-esteem as opposed to low self-esteem, because if you have low self-esteem you're likely depressed, anxious, maybe even contemplating suicide, but the problem is most people get high self-esteem in very unhealthy ways, they have to be special and above average, they always comparing themselves to others in order to gauge their own self-esteem, and self-esteem tends to be contingent on success, right, so when you're doing well, ok you apply self-esteem, but what happens when you fall flat on your face? Self-esteem deserts you. And so when I was learning all this in my post-doc career and then practicing self-compassion personally, I thought self-compassion is such a better alternative, because it's not about success, it's not about being better than others, it's just about relating to yourself kindly with empathy and understanding because you're a flawed human being, just like everyone else. So in fact we've done some research that does differentiate the two. Self-compassion is not contingent on success the way self-esteem is, it's not linked to social comparison the way self-esteem is, and there's no link between self-compassion and narcissism, and unfortunately there's a pretty vast link between people with high self-esteem and narcissism, so it's really a positive way of relating to yourself, but it's not about judging yourself positively, it's just about relating to yourself kindly, so it's much more stable.

[0:06:24.1] Acharya Fleet Maull: So the idea of compassion and self-compassion is clearly not unique to the Buddhist tradition but perhaps in the Buddhist tradition these ideas like Buddha nature or innate unconditional worthiness or what in the Shambhala tradition is called innate unconditional basic goodness allows for kind of a sense of worthiness of self-worth is not conditional, it's not based on these other things, that it's really already there that we can somehow tap into.

[0:06:53.1] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yes, yeah, I think that's right, I mean certainly my own conceptualisation of self-compassion was influenced by my Buddhist practice although I do think the idea is in many religious traditions, it actually is quite a secular idea. But I agree that the notion that we are all human beings and we are not in total control and causes and conditions to lead us to act as we do is a very good reason for having compassion for all people. But you know in some traditions that have a very strong notion of original sin, or something like that it can be a little harder for people to accept the idea that all people are worthy of compassion and there's not much you can do about that. But luckily compassion is an innate trait we know from working with people like Dacher Keltner at UC Berkeley that we evolved to be a compassionate species, human beings, their brains evolved to be compassionate because that had evolutionary advantages way back when, so it's not like you have to evoke some mystical Buddha nature to explain the fact that we have compassion within us, our brains also are designed to have compassion, so...

[0:08:08.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah it seems absence of fear response were fairly naturally compassionate and collaborative and partnering as human beings.

[0:08:17.1] Dr. Kristin Neff: That's right, that's right, and that's why I think it's so much easier to be compassionate to others than ourselves, and especially close others, because typically when your loved one fails you usually don't feel personally threatened so you're able to be your best self, your most understanding self, your most encouraging supportive self, but when we fail we feel so threatened we go into the threat defence mode, we

become reactive and then we just end up beating ourselves up as opposed to being more kind of mature in the way that we deal with ourselves, you might say, yeah.

[0:08:50.4] Acharya Fleet Maull: Well, before we get into the specifics of the mindfulness based self-compassion model, maybe we could still drill down a bit and say what exactly is self-compassion?

[0:09:00.0] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yeah, so I have a particular definition of self-compassion, you know when I first decided I wanted to research it, I had a really been operational need to find in the psychological literature, and to be honest even in Buddhism although certainly people had talked about self-compassion in a more informal way, it was kind of always in the context of being compassionate to yourself as well as others, it was more just from the Buddhist perspective, you don't exclude the self, so I really started with my definition of compassion for self, starting from what it means to have compassion for others, right, so I read a lot of books and I came up with the three component model of self-compassion which would also apply to compassion for others, by the way, but I was focused on self-compassion. So the first, which is most obvious is kindness, being kind, open hearted, tender, gentle with yourself, trying to alleviate your own suffering, part of compassion is the desire to alleviate suffering so that means asking yourself what do I need, and see if you can help yourself in times of distress, but there's also a couple of elements that are very important. One is what I call common humanity, right, and this is definitely influenced by the Buddhist perspective, the idea of interdependence, the idea that all people are imperfect and all people live imperfect lives, and no-one's in total control of their own life and this is kind of maybe self-evident too from the Buddhist perspective, but I think it makes a lot of sense, so the idea is when we fail or we make a mistake or something difficult happens, instead of thinking whoa, it's me, poor me, just really self-pitying, self-compassion says this is part of the human experience, this isn't abnormal. I mean most people when they fail they feel like this should not be happening, right, as if, who signed that contract saying that they would never fail or make a mistake and nothing terrible would happen, I mean this is a part of what you signed up for. So with self-compassion you remember that this is a part of the shared human experience, so we don't feel so isolated by our suffering. And then the third component, and it took me a while to figure out that I think it should actually be there, it's actually mindfulness. So right, mindfulness is paying attention to what's happening, even when what's happening is unpleasant, we don't want to look at it, but in order to have self-compassion we have to be able to turn toward our own pain, we have to have the courage to be present with it, whether that pain's from feelings of shame or just the pain of something difficult happening in our life, we have to be present with it long enough for us to be able to open our hearts to ourselves, if we just like skip over it, we're lost in problem solving mode, we actually can't have self-compassion, but we also can't, we don't want to be present with our pain in a way that I call over identify, that's when you get fused or locked in the thoughts I am bad, this is terrible, the worst thing that ever happened, so mindfulness is kind of a balance awareness where you're present with what is but not in a way that gets fused or that runs away with the storyline of what's happening and I really think that mindfulness is actually necessary for self-compassion to arise, so I include it as one of the components.

[0:12:31.2] Acharya Fleet Maull: I wonder if you could say something about I know mindfulness based self-compassion is presented as kind of a mainstream or secular practice I think, <inaudible 0:12:41.9> but is it really related to the traditional loving kindness practices or <inaudible 0:12:48.6> practices which sometimes have been translated simply as unconditional friendliness, which are also being presented in a very mainstream way today in the mindfulness community, so is there a direct connection between those two?

[0:13:02.2] Dr. Kristin Neff: First I need to correct you, it's called mindful self-compassion, not mindfulness based self-compassion, the reason that's important is a lot of mindfulness based programs stem from MBSR, mindfulness based stress reduction and our adaptations of it, this program although we include mindfulness is not a spin-off of MBSR, it's really its own thing and mindfulness, we teach it, but it's really secondary to the main goal of teaching self-compassion. And in terms of loving kindness, we do teach some loving kindness in our program but we really emphasise compassion. So what's the difference between loving kindness and compassion? They're really two sides of the same coin right, some people say when loving kindness meets suffering and stays loving it manifests as compassion right, so by definition compassion needs to be practiced in the presence of suffering right because it is the warm hearted response to suffering. Loving kindness, although related... sometimes when we bump into suffering, again our defence mode gets triggered and the reactions change. So we mainly practice calling in suffering, we kind of joke, could have called it the opening to pain and suffering program, but we thought no-one would sign up for it right, so we practice in the contents of suffering mainly in giving ourselves the kind response, but we also do teach some loving kindness practices especially for ourselves. It's typically the hardest to feel loving kindness to ourselves, so we don't do the traditional practice where you go through the neutral person and the challenging person all <inaudible 0:14:39.0> beings, we really modify the practice to really help us learn loving kindness for our self. But again it's kind of secondary apices in our program, not to say it's any less important.

[0:14:50.7] Acharya Fleet Maull: I think I'll definitely write down mindful self-compassion and I'll give...

[0:14:55.7] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yes, it's hard, I'm reading mindfulness space, so...

[0:14:58.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: <inaudible 0:14:58.9> go into all these different things, so mindful self-compassion. So maybe we could dive into the research a little bit. At some point I'd like to ask you to actually lead us in a little of a mindful self-compassion practice, but why I want to dive into the research a little bit, I would think that this is related to things like distress, tolerance, to resilience, certainly we know a lot more every day, every week about the neuro faculties in the brain and what they support and so forth.

[0:15:29.8] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yes yes, so most of the research has been done on self-compassion in general right, there's been some research on the mindful self-compassion program but it's pretty new, but there's a vast body of research on self-compassion just in general and I think it's definitely showing that self-compassion is a strength that helps us cope with adversity, so just to give a couple of examples, there was a study of people going through a divorce and the researcher coded how self-compassionately people were talking about their divorce experience and found that the level of self-compassion was by far the strongest predictor of how well they were coping nine months later with the divorce than anything else they looked at. Similarly they've looked at vets coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan, and find that a soldier's level of self-compassion is more predictive of whether or not they develop PTSD symptoms than the level of combat exposure. So we're really seeing that self-compassion is a way to cope with stress situations, cope with difficult emotions and leads to real resilience, so yeah, there's a lot of research reporting on basic <inaudible 0:16:49.0> and also you know that self-compassion, people who have more self-compassion are less likely to be anxious or depressed, to feel shame, to contemplate suicide, really a whole host of these negative mind states are reduced with people who have higher self-compassion or who were taught to have more self-compassion. At the same time, people who have more self-compassion are also generally happier and have more positive mind states like optimism and gratitude and that's because at the end of the day self-compassion, even though it's aimed at suffering, is actually a positive emotion. Feels good, kindness, connectedness,

mindfulness, these are positive states of mind that are generated in response to suffering, which is one of the reasons I think it's so powerful.

[0:17:35.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: So you spoke to that there's been a lot of research done on self-compassion per se and there's some more on your model, mindful self-compassion, but the earlier research or the other research you're referencing is that you're using the same operational definition you developed, which actually includes mindfulness as a component of it.

[0:17:53.2] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yes, exactly, so what happens, I've published the first study kind of with my definition of self-compassion back in 2003, and I've published a scale to measure self-compassion, so it measures each of the components, how kind versus judgmental you are, your sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over identification. So the vast majority of research done on self-compassion has used this scale, although now we're seeing other methodologies like people using writing prompts, you know having people consider their situation, maybe in the lab, you have a student fail at something and have them apply mindfulness, common humanity and kindness to themselves due to that failure and see how that changes behaviour. We're starting to see some more interventions with these students, so they feel the shifting, but now I'd say probably 85% of all the research is done using the self-compassion scale.

[0:18:51.3] Acharya Fleet Maull: And the self-compassion scale of course can be used for various kinds of cycles, so for research and self-reporting research. Has it been combined with more biological brain research studies?

[0:19:06.2] Dr. Kristin Neff: There is a little bit, every neuroscientist I meet I say please study the brain on self-compassion, we don't have enough research yet, I'd really like to see more. We know a little bit, like the brain on self-compassion insula gets activated and <inaudible [0:19:22.6> is less active, hormonal changes like we release cortisol, but we don't know enough, I'm really hoping that that will change over the next few years.

[0:19:32.7] Acharya Fleet Maull: And so are there any studies that show coherence or correlation with measures of wellbeing and measures of self-compassion?

[0:19:46.3] Dr. Kristin Neff: Oh absolutely, there's been several med analyses actually that show that self-compassion is you know moderately or strongly related to wellbeing just depending on the kind of study. They'd definitely begin less anxiety, depression, stress, less mal-adapted perfection, more resilience, more happiness, more optimism, so I think it's a pretty established finding now that self-compassion is linked to mental health and wellbeing.

[0:20:15.4] Acharya Fleet Maull: I think obviously we're talking about the very quality of our relationship with our self, and what can be more important, foundationally to our life than the quality of that most important relationship we have.

[0:20:30.1] Dr. Kristin Neff: Exactly, 24/7 right, I mean maybe we're blessed to have good supportive friends and family, but when you wake up at three in the morning with your head full of the storyline of this problem or how terrible something you did was, you're really the first line of defence to be able to help yourself, to support yourself emotionally. And many people, it's interesting, they have positive relationships with others, but they undermine their own relationship with themselves to the point where it's almost like it goes to waste, right. Many people are kind, compassionate, loving people to others, but they're so hard on themselves that they're really, I see this pulling the rug out from underneath yourself continually. People, if you start listening to the things people say to themselves when we're doing the workshop, it's rather quite shocking, so trying to counter that.

[0:21:25.0] Acharya Fleet Maull: So could you then sort of outline for us this model and actual practice of mindful self-compassion? How you teach it and so forth?

[0:21:35.5] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yeah, so we've developed like I say an eight week program, very highly structured program and we're coming out with a manual for it next year. And so we started out teaching basic concepts of self-compassion and we have a session devoted to mindfulness, but if you want to learn mindfulness our program's not the right home for you, but we teach enough to try to get the ball rolling. But we really rely both on formal meditation practices, we teach a lot of meditation, but also informal practices, the thing about self-compassion is it needs to be done on the spot, in the moment, when the suffering hits or when you've just made that mistake or said that embarrassing thing. So we teach a lot of practices to help people be a good friend to themselves in the moment. So one thing we teach is we really emphasise supportive touch through being touched, and that's because we do know that there's a physiological foundation to self-compassion, it's actually based on the work of Paul Gilbert and others, but the idea is in addition to the threat defence system which we have to help us feel safe, we also have the mammalian care giving system, so in other words when we're in the presence of three main triggers, there's three main compassion triggers which is physical warmth, gentle touch and soothing vocalisations like an "aaaawww" sound, around the world the same sound of compassion has been found so we help people tap into that by for instance, finding the soothing touch by putting your hands on your heart or elsewhere, it actually helps calm down the sympathetic nervous system, makes us feel safer and more relaxed, which actually then sets the stage for the mind to follow. So we really, you know it is an embodied practice, self-compassion and so we use the body as one of the access points in, and then we also teach practices really to help people remember to apply the three components of self-compassion, to be mindful, <inaudible 0:23:38.8> this is moment of suffering, remembering common humanity when to be kind to themselves, that's kind of the main thing we emphasise in the program, is real life tools for dealing with difficult emotions when they arise. And the study shows that self-compassion anomaly can be learned but all gains can be maintained for years, so it seems like this is something that people take home with them after the warm glow of the class and the teacher is over, and can actually apply to themselves in real life time.

[0:24:09.7] Acharya Fleet Maull: What do you encourage people to do when they're really emotionally triggered? Like really you know pretty on fire, headed down the rabbit hole, like really emotionally triggered.

[0:24:20.3] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yeah, so typically, I mean that's another reason why mindfulness really has to be part of self-compassion practice, you can't separate the two, because mindfulness is generally more kind of calming and cooling, it tends to create space for difficult emotions, so for instance if someone's very emotionally triggered, they might focus on their breath or focus on the soles of their feet, or label their emotions, all these are classic mindfulness techniques to prevent us from being overwhelmed by negative emotions. Self-compassion is we say a bit more warming and activating than the mindfulness practice, in other words sometimes when we give ourselves unconditional love, what comes up is memories of all the conditions under which we are unloved right, so sometimes actually self-compassion practice can bring up a lot of difficult emotions and we don't always feel soothed and calmed immediately, sometimes it's like whoa, you know. So typically we recommend people first go to a mindfulness practice if they're feeling overwhelmed, like if they're doing a self-compassion practice they get overwhelmed, we have them go to a mindfulness practice, but if that doesn't work, what we really emphasise in our program is just kind of behavioural self-compassion, in other words asking yourself what do I need right now? What do I truly need? And maybe what we really need is to get off of the cushion and make yourself a cup of tea or take a warm bath or pet the cat, because we want to relate to ourselves with kindness and gentleness as we're

doing the practice itself. That might mean kind of compassionate distraction right, if you do something to distract yourself from your difficult emotions, but with the intention to meet your need and to care for yourself because you're suffering, you actually are still strengthening the habit of self-compassion, even though you're doing it in a more round-about way. So we've found that it's actually pretty safe and we really help people work with those difficult emotional moments.

[0:26:26.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: I'm curious about, I'm hearing a lot about the elements of it, but I'm also curious about if you thought about trauma informed, specifically trauma informed approach to self-compassion, my work is a lot about training people to work in the criminal justice system and other sort of systems where people have a lot of trauma in their lives, and so we worked on how do you even share the practice of mindfulness in more trauma informed ways.

[0:26:52.2] Dr. Kristin Neff: Yes, absolutely. We're very aware of trauma I mean my co-developer Chris Germer is a clinical psychologist, <inaudible 0:27:00.4> are clinical psychologists. So first of all our program, mindful self-compassion, isn't designed for clinical populations, it's designed for what I call average neurotic you know, but we figured that any group we work with, about 10% are likely to have some sort of trauma history, so we build a lot of safety into the program, helping people work with, from the get-go, what happens if you start to get overwhelmed, or memories come up, to make the program safe, but we don't dive deeply into it, it's not therapy, but we have a group of people now at the Centre of Mindful Self-Compassion, who are specifically working on developing a version of MSC designed for people with trauma histories. And so basically we're just going a bit more slowly, spending more time helping people build up the compassion muscle because people usually with trauma histories have got <inaudible 0:27:53.8> damage to that system that's supposed to be able to evoke that compassionate response, so it is happening, but right now we're mainly trying to make our program safe for trauma populations, but the next step will be coming soon, to actually bring this in to people who really need it, that's the main... There's a little bit of research with the self-report scale which shows that people who manage to gain self-compassion through maybe therapy or a successful <inaudible 0:28:23.2> relationship, it's one of the most important coping mechanisms for dealing with past trauma. In fact you might say self-compassion is kind of a way of re-parenting yourself, that's partly what you're doing when you're giving yourself compassion, you're re-parenting yourself, you're giving yourself emotionally supportive response you should have received as a child but didn't. So I think there's a lot of potential there.

[0:28:46.5] Acharya Fleet Maull: What about leading us in something like you might lead in one of your eight week courses?

[0:28:51.4] Dr. Kristin Neff: Okay, so what I'm going to do, I'm going to lead us through something called the self-compassion break, which is, it's one of the most handy dandy exercises from the course, it's basically a way of reminding ourselves to use the three components of self-compassion when things are difficult. So I'm going to close my eyes, yours, you may or may not want to close your eyes, you can't see me if your eyes are closed, but it's helpful to have your eyes closed to go inward. Maybe just take a few deep breaths to re-centre yourself. Okay, then I'd invite you to call to mind some real situation in your life right now that's causing some emotional struggle or stress. Okay, so this may be a relationship issue, or work issue, or health issue, try not to choose a situation that's overwhelmingly difficult, right, we want to take baby steps as we're learning the practice, but a situation that's difficult enough or it's really causing you some struggle. I'll give everyone a moment or two to select the situation that feels right to work with right now. Okay and then I invite you to really call the situation to mind, make it real, make it present, you know who said what? What are you afraid might happen? What did happen?

Just call the specifics of the situation to mind. Then I'm going to be saying a series of phrases designed to remind us of the three components of self-compassion, but I'd like you to just let the phrases drop into your awareness. The first phrase is this is a moment of suffering, but we're doing this, we're bringing mindfulness to turn toward and acknowledge the fact that suffering is present. But I'd invite you to use language that really speaks to you, you know maybe something like; you know this is really hard right now, but I'm going through. Or, you know; I'm really struggling, whatever language helps you remind yourself mindfully that suffering is present. And then the second phrase is suffering is a part of life, okay, we're reminding our self of common humanity, remembering that suffering is normal, it's not abnormal to feel this way, so then using language that really speaks to you in a way you can take it in, maybe something like; I'm not alone in feeling this way. Or; it's normal to struggle in this way. Or just; it's just part of what it means to be a human being. Okay and then the third element we want to bring in is kindness, and so what I'd invite you to do is see if you can first of all adopt some physical gesture of kindness, maybe your hands on your heart, maybe cupping your face, some gesture that kind of feels like it's a gesture of kindness and support for yourself. And then reminding yourselves that what we need is to be kind in the moment, so to really ask ourselves what do we need right now? You know there may be something that comes to mind, something like you may be strong, or maybe courageous, or patient, or perhaps I accept myself as I am, so letting come to mind any words of kindness and support that you need to hear right now to help you with this situation. And if you're feeling stuck, sometimes it's not a habit where we have well developed... you can always think what would you say to a good friend who is struggling with the exact same situation, you are \_\_\_\_, maybe think about what you might say to that friend, the tone you would use to that friend, just try it out with yourself. Okay and then dropping your hands, and dropping the practice, you can open your eyes. But just remembering that for many people the practice, the self-compassion, it's not instant and actually some people who did that practice called the self-compassion break maybe weren't feeling soothed and calmed and actually felt agitated or frustrated, so just to know that the ultimate <inaudible 0:35:13.3> of practice is to accept ourselves exactly as we are, whether or not the feeling state that's evoked is not the one we think should be evoked, I mean really relate to whatever happens to us, with kindness and patience and self-compassion.

[0:35:29.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: Thank you so much, this was wonderful, this was really great.