

Self-Soothing Exercises With Dr. Kristin Neff

Susan David: I'm delighted today to be speaking with Dr. Kristin Neff, who is one of the world's leading experts on self-compassion. She was the first person to operationally define what the construct is and to measure it, and has furthered her work through writing, speaking, and incredible books on the topic. Kristin, I'm so delighted to speak with you today.

Kristin Neff: Oh, thank you, Sue, for having me. I'm very happy to be here.

Susan David: So, Kristin, maybe a good place for us to get started is, what is self-compassion?

Kristin Neff: Well, so the easy way to think of, what self-compassion is, is if you think of the way you might naturally treat a good friend when they were struggling, right, how supportive and kind and caring you'd be, the concern you'd show toward your friend. So really with self-compassion, what we're doing, quite simply, is turning that caring response toward ourselves. And so that's kind of the easy way to think of what self-compassion is, but in my scientific work, I actually define it as having three main components, all of which really need to be there for it to count as self-compassion, and the first is actually mindfulness. So your listeners may have heard about mindfulness before. Mindfulness really refers to the ability to be present with things as they are, even when what's happening is kind of difficult. And so we need to be present with our own suffering. We actually need to notice it, not ignore it, in order for us to have a compassionate response. So for instance, currently in this COVID crisis, often, we're so busy just getting things done and taking care of the kids and making sure we have enough groceries that we haven't necessarily paused to check in with ourselves and really validate how hard it is. So the first step is mindfulness becoming aware of our stress. And then, the second is kindness, right? So we need to have a kind, caring response. That's similar to what we talked about with treating ourselves like we would a good friend.

The third element that's really important and maybe not so obvious is framing our experience in light of the shared human experience. Often, especially when our struggles come from failing or making a mistake, it feels as if everyone in the world is somehow leading a normal, perfect life. Right? And it's just me who's failed, or it's just me who has this life challenge. This isn't a logical response. It's an emotional one, but so not only are we hurting, we feel all alone in our situation, which kind of adds insult to injury because of course we know that it is normal to struggle. It is normal to make mistakes. It is normal for things to be difficult in life, so when we remember that with compassion. And actually the word compassion from the Latin, "passion" means to suffer, "com" means with. There's an inherent connectedness in the experience of compassion.

So when we feel connected in our own struggle, then it really helps so that we don't feel so alone.

Susan David: That's so powerful. Why, or how, do you think self-compassion might be particularly important in this moment of struggle that so many of us are going through at the moment?

Kristin Neff: Yeah. So, well, part of the reason is because we don't have access to our normal sources of support, right? So maybe talking with your friends or seeing other people as a way, we feel kind of more connected in our struggles, and sheltering in place makes us feel kind of isolated. It's just a very difficult time actually in human history, and so one of the ironies, I would say, about this situation is that normally we tend to think it's just us who is struggling. One of the silver linings of this situation is, you know, we can't fall into that illusion because the entire planet literally is coping with the same situation, with the same kind of moment suffering. The good thing about that is, hopefully, we can feel a little bit more connected, but having said that, it's absolutely necessary that we take proactive steps to care for ourselves in this moment. If you're just focusing on your kids or other people, you will not have the resources you need to get through this situation. What we know, is that if you are an ally with yourself, if you're supportive towards yourself, if you have your own back, you're going to be much stronger, much more able to cope with difficult times than if you're hard on yourself or you criticize yourself or you're cold to yourself. And so that's one of the reasons why in a situation like this, which is very traumatic, I mean, this is a big one, right? We actually need the strength and the power of self-compassion to help us get through it.

Susan David: I think about, when I think of listeners, and I think even of my own experience day-to-day, of what are, you know, some small things that we can do with ourselves that start evoking the practice of self-compassion, and one of the practices that I've been wondering about is the practice of self-soothing. I'm wondering if you could walk us through what the practice of self-soothing in the context of self-compassion would look like.

Kristin Neff: Yes. So, touch is an extremely powerful signal of care, right? So when babies are born, for the first couple of years, parents can't talk to their children, but they can let them know that they care through the power of touch. So the body is exquisitely tuned to touch as a signal of being cared for and valued really. And so what we know with self-compassion is you can communicate your own care for yourself through touch, and what it does, is it works directly with our physiology, you know, it deactivates our fight or flight response, the cortisol, the adrenaline, and actually activates what's called the parasympathetic response. We feel cared for. We feel calmer. You know, our heart rate variability increases, especially now, because many of us are deprived from, by touch, you know, we aren't hugging our friends. We aren't seeing as many people. Some people are living completely alone and kind of craving touch. And so the body, I mean, the body knows the difference between the touch of oneself and other people, but it still responds to self touch with this feeling of care and safety and it helps calm us down. So it's a very easy and simple way to express care for ourselves. So some people like putting both hands over their heart, for some people that feels a little vulnerable, so another version could be maybe putting kind of a fist over your heart, symbolizing strength and power, and then putting a gentle hand over that.

Or you can put both hands over your stomach or your solar plexus, or give yourself a hug, or cradle your own face, as long as you've washed your hands. So really I invite people to find what touch works for them, and often it's the type of touch that evokes memories of being cared for in the past. And then when you do that, again, even if your head can't go there because you're just thinking about how terrible the situation is or how terrible you are, if you use touch as a signal of care, your body responds. So you can actually be self-compassionate at the physical level, almost as a way to help prime the mental and emotional responses. It's really quite effective.

Susan David: I'm wondering about a second practice, which is the soles of feet practice, and this is, to my mind when people are rushing through the day, things are frantic, they're trying to homeschool children, and go from Zoom call to Zoom call, how can they anchor themselves through just walking?

Kristin Neff: Yeah. So the soles of the feet practice is related to walking meditation, which is when people actually meditate by feeling their soles of feet as they touch the floor, as they walk. This doesn't have to be done as a meditation, however. At any point, during the day, if you just feel the soles of your feet and their connectedness to the floor, feel yourself grounded to the earth, feel yourself anchored to the earth, it can really help calm us and stabilize us. It's a very good thing to do if you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Two reasons: A, is it anchors you to the earth, but the second reason is that our awareness goes as far away from our brain as is humanly possible, and the brain is usually where the story is, where the traumatic emotions are.

So you ground yourself in your feet, and you can do this standing, or you can do this walking, and there's research that actually shows that it helps calm and stabilize us when we're feeling overwhelmed. It's again, a very easy practice. We teach this to doctors for instance, on the wards, as they're doing their rounds, maybe they've got to go into a room, and, you know, deliver bad news to a patient, so they use this as a way to kind of ground and calm and stabilize themselves as they're doing their work. It can be done anytime.

Susan David: Another practice, and thank you for that, another practice that it seems like can be done at any time is people's capacity to connect with their own breathing. What does that look like?

Kristin Neff: Right. One of the reasons in many, many traditions, people use the breath as a way to calm themselves, or why people say take a breath, is because whenever we focus our mind at a single object, like the felt sense of breathing as we breathe in and out, anytime we focus the mind in that way, it has the effect of calming and stabilizing the mind. Again, instead of being focused on what you're thinking or what you're feeling or what's going on outside of you, if you just take a few moments as little as three minutes, they call it the three minute breathing space, it can be very, very effective just to focus on first of all, noticing your breathing. Right, feeling the sense of air moving in and out. You can take more slow breaths, if that works for you, or you can just breathe very normally. Again, I think it's, whatever's more effective, and just taking a little bit of time out where what you're doing is you're disengaging from ruminating about what's happening,

or you kind of disengaging from maybe your emotional reaction to what's happening. And you just take three short minutes to kind of feel your breathing, feel this breath in and out. Those three minutes can make a huge difference in your ability not to be so reactive and to actually respond in a healthier way to whatever is happening.

Susan David: I'm finding as I'm listening to your soothing voice, I'm breathing deeper and feel calmer and more compassionate already.

Kristin Neff: By the way, I just want to say you can also do a variation of that where you can imagine as you're breathing in, you're breathing in compassion for yourself, and as you breathe out, you're breathing compassion for others. This is the practice we teach to caregivers, like if you're at the bedside of someone who's ill, you simply use the breath as a metaphorical vehicle to remember to give yourself compassion as you breathe in, "this is so hard for me right now." And to breathe out for the person you're caring for, "this is so difficult for them right now." So you remember to keep it flowing in and out.

Susan David: It's just, yeah, it's incredibly powerful. We were speaking last week with Dr. Julie Gottman about relationships and how, you know, one of the cruelest ironies of this pandemic is that we are often in incredibly close quarters with the people we most love, and this has changed the dynamics for many people of their relationships, where they're finding that they're more stressed and less tolerant of one another. I connected with Julie about this idea that, you know, when we are trying to be more loving and more giving towards our partners, it often requires us to connect with ourselves and with our own needs, and then being able to articulate and communicate those rather than just be reactive to that, so I'm wondering if you have any self-compassion practices that connect with scanning your own body so that you can understand a little bit more of where you are at right now.

Kristin Neff: Yeah. We actually have a practice where basically you identify what emotion it is you're feeling. That step alone is very powerful because instead of being lost in the emotion, you actually have some awareness of it, and then you try to locate that feeling in your body, you know, "where do I feel the anger, or the frustration, or the fear? Is it gripping in my throat or a pit in my stomach or a hollowness in my heart?" And then what you can do is put a gentle hand over the place in your body where you're feeling the emotion again, kind of, using that hand as a symbol of caring, of kindness, and then what you can do is just simply kind of, soften your body, around the place you're feeling the emotion, so you're kind of relaxing your body, and then you can soothe and comfort yourself. Right? So you can even say kind things like, you know, "I'm so sorry you're feeling this, darling," if that feels comfortable for you to say or, "I'm so sorry you're feeling this. I'm here for you. Is there anything I can do to help?" Right? Once you've done the soothing of yourself, then you can kind of start to allow the emotion to be there because what happens, is when we resist a feeling, it makes it worse. This is a very well established, psychological phenomenon. You know what we resist, persists. When we fight something, it gets stronger.

Susan David: Kristin, you have so kindly offered to walk us through a live, if you like, compassion

practice so that listeners can experience what this might feel like. I'm wondering if we might be able to do that now.

Kristin Neff: Yes, I'd be happy to. So this is a practice called the self-compassion break, and it's quite quick. And it's something you can do at any time, really. What it involves is, you know, aimed at a moment of difficulty, what we do as we're being in mindfulness of the emotion, we remember our common humanity experiencing it, and we give ourselves kindness. So I'd invite everyone to just close your eyes for a moment. You don't have to do this like a meditation, but the first time you learn it, it's a little more helpful to experience it, so if you just close your eyes again, if that feels comfortable. If not, keep them open, but just settle into your body. You may actually want to feel your feet on the floor or the weight of your body on the chair or the bed, wherever you are right now.

And so just call to mind some situation in your life right now that is difficult for you.

So, for many, that's going to be the crisis, the pandemic, right? But instead of just thinking generally about it, maybe some aspect of what's happening, fear for your health, the health of a loved one, maybe it's a frustration at having to stay at home, or maybe it is, you know, a conflict with your partner at home because you're cramped together, or frustration with your children not being at school, so just think of one aspect of the situation right now that's difficult for you, and just call it to mind. Just let yourself really feel it for this moment. Feel the frustration or the difficulty of it.

And so I'm going to be saying a series of phrases and I'd like you just to kind of let them drop into your awareness, and then I'm going to invite you to find language that works for you to express this. So the first has to do with mindfulness, right? Remembering that this, you know, what you're experiencing, this is a moment of suffering.

We're just being aware of the fact that this is really hard, kind of, validating it, bringing our awareness, we're turning toward it. This is difficult. It won't be forever, but right now, it's hard. But then we want to remember, you know, the fact that this is suffering, struggle, this is part of the shared human experience, right? It's not just me. So using language like suffering, is a part of life. It's a part of being a human being. I'm not alone in feeling this way, and yes, it's true that some people are suffering more than others. Of course, that's always the case. But nonetheless, we are all in some way or another struggling. So see if you could feel your connectedness in that fact. The cloth of suffering is very large.

But because it's difficult for all of us, we want to respond with kindness and care. So I would invite you to use some sort of touch, maybe your hands on your heart, or your face, or stroking your shoulder, or hands on your belly, just some sort of touch that for you feels comforting and reassuring, helps you feel safe. And see if you can use some language to express kindness, support, concern.

So it may be something like, you know, “I’m so sorry you’re going through this. It’s going to be okay,” or “I care about you and I will do whatever I can to help,” or “I love you,” just really thinking about what you need to hear right now.

And if the words aren’t flowing easily, sometimes we aren’t used to speaking to ourselves kindly, you can just simply think, you know, what would I say to a good friend I cared about right now, who is probably going through a very similar situation. Right? What types of things might I naturally say that comfort, support, reassure my friend. You know, not only what would I say, but how would I say it? What would my tone of voice be? And then see if you can say the same thing to yourself.

Okay, and so then letting the practice go, just taking a moment to really just check in with how you’re feeling. Sometimes when people open the door of their hearts in this way, kind of a lot of old pain comes up. Right? So it doesn’t feel good for everyone. This is really a practice that works on the intention to be more compassionate with ourselves, and then eventually over time, the ability builds, but it can be a little bit of a struggle at first. So if that’s the case for you, don’t judge yourself for that. It actually means you’re doing the practice correctly, not that you’re doing it wrong.

Okay, so that’s the practice.

Susan David: So beautiful. Completely brings tears to my eyes and just the recognition that there are so many people suffering, and now is not the time for judgment, but the time for kindness, is incredibly unifying.

Kristin Neff: Yes, and we have to include ourselves because if we don’t, we will burn out. If we just give and give and give and don’t include ourselves, we won’t be able to sustain caring for others.

Susan David: Kristin, thank you for bringing this powerful and gentle work to us. I so appreciate it.

Kristin Neff: You’re very welcome. Thank you for having this program as well. Appreciate it.

Susan David: That’s all for today. Be well, stay safe, and let’s check in next week.