



stressors. How I related to myself, it really, really helped. So then I did get job at the University of Texas, and I started researching it about 20 years ago actually, and at that time, no one had researched it precisely this way. People have researched very similar topics, but I created a scale to measure self-compassion and I defined it, and then, now there's almost 4,000 studies on it, so it's really taken off, which is very gratifying.

**Jen:** Yeah, absolutely so let's talk about what exactly self-compassion is, in your definition. How do we define it? Then, how is it also different from things like self-esteem?

**Kristin:** OK, good questions. The easy answer of self-compassion is just turning that friendly compassionate attitude inwards. When I decided I wanted to measure it, I realized that I needed a more formal definition and that there were actually three separate components to self-compassion. They were all needed. So this kindness which I talked about, being warm, supportive, and helping yourself, but there is also mindfulness. Mindfulness is actually at the foundation of self-compassion. In other words, mindfulness is the ability to be present with what is without kind of immediately trying to fight it or resist it, or run away from it. Typically when pain is present, and we feel badly about ourselves or something difficult is happening, the last thing we want to do is be mindful of it right? You've got to be somewhere else. We need to be mindful to be able to turn towards it and acknowledge "hey, this is really hard", and if you just stiff up a little bit, you can be a good friend to yourself. If a friend calls you and like I'm too busy. We have to take the call from ourselves and say "Wow, I'm really having a hard time" and then that evokes a sense of care and kindness, what can I do to help? But also what I realized the more I thought about it really important is what's different between self-compassion and self-pity. Self-pity is woe is me. Self-pity is a self-focused emotion, as if I am the only one who's struggling. Its only me who has made this mistake or has this fatal flaw. Compassion, by definition, is rooted in the shared human experience, right? If I have compassion for you, I think "Oh, I've been there too. This is something we all go through." So self-compassion as a connected aspect is really not about me at all. I could have just called it inner compassion. There's really no self-involved. It's just saying that my experience and my experience of imperfection is worthy of compassion like all other human being's. And also, we fall into the trap of thinking that something has gone wrong when make a mistake. Or something has gone wrong when we have issues like health issues or relationship issues. When in fact, that is the human experience, right? It's not like normal means perfect and when it's not perfect that something has gone wrong. But we think that way. And the reason that's so damaging is not only are we struggling, we feel all alone, we feel weird, we feel isolated, we feel abnormal. A really important thing that self-compassion does is it normalizes imperfection and pain. This is something that we all go through, I'm not alone, it's not just me, and that actually allows us to catastrophize a little bit less, to feel little bit less isolated, and therefore we have more resources to try to help ourselves in some way.

**Jen:** So I guess, how is that different? Or how is that linked to self-esteem? because I understand what about if I say something to myself "I don't deserve compassion, is that pity or is that just lack of self-esteem? How do you differentiate those?

**Kristin:** Right? So well, so both self-compassion and self-esteem are forms of self-worth. So if you say I'm not worthy of compassion, then you'd probably be low both on self-compassion and self-esteem. But the source of self-worth is actually quite different, so self-esteem is a positive evaluation of worth like I'm a worthy person. I'm not a worthy person. I am a good person. I am a so-so person. And typically, is contingent on things like successful performance, right? I am worthy if I do well, but if I fail, I am

worthless or social approval, I am worthy if other people think I'm worthy or appearance actually is one of the biggest domains in which people get their self-esteem. I'm attractive, therefore I am worthy. I am unattractive, therefore I'm not worthy. So self-compassion, the sense of worth, just comes from being a flawed human being like everyone else. There is no judgment or evaluation. So, you deserve compassion whether you're successful or whether you are flawed right? Whether you likely looked in the mirror or what you don't, it's that unconditional source of worthiness that simply comes from being a human being like everyone else trying the best you can. The reason that's so important is because the self-worth associated with self-compassion is much more stable than self-esteem. Also like some people get their self-esteem by feeling better than others, narcissism, or at least being above average. I mean, it's not okay to be average, you want to be above average, which leads to things like bullying, gossiping or putting other people down. You feel good about yourself. For self-compassion, you just have to be a flawed human being like everyone else, so it's more connecting as opposed to disconnecting. So even if it has the benefits of self-worth that are linked to self-esteem, but we don't have to flip over backwards to try to get it. It's just there intrinsically as part of our human nature.

**Jen:** I'm already feeling more compassion for myself, just listening to you talk. So, let's talk about myths related to self-compassion. Can you discuss what some of those are and perhaps maybe debunk some of them for us?

**Kristin:** Yes, it's about five myths that come up again and again. Doesn't matter what culture I'm talking to, it's a crazy, they are the same ones. One is that it's weak. People think compassion just means like taking a break while you are not feeling yourself, feeling bit soft and weak. Well sometimes the compassionate thing to do to alleviate your suffering is to take a break, but sometimes it's not right? So in other words, if you need to be brave or strong or say no or stand up for yourself or fight the good fight, these are all forms of self-compassion. So for instance, what we know is people who go through really difficult times, it could be divorce, it could be COVID. There's a lot of research on coping with COVID. It could be coping with cancer or we even have a lot of data on combat soldiers. What we know is that when life gets tough, the more compassionate you are, the more you have your own back, the stronger you are, the more able you are to coping it through. Think about it. If your inner enemy is cutting yourself down, "I am ashamed of you, you are horrible," that is not going to make you stronger. That is going to make you weaker, but saying I'm here for you, how can I help? What do you need? That type of supportive attitude makes you much stronger, so that's one method the research totally disproves and another one, big one, is that it's selfish right? People think, well, I only have like five units of compassion, so I give three to me, I'll only going to have two left over for you, but of course it doesn't work that way. It's additive. The more compassion we give ourselves, the more resources we have available to give up. So research shows, for instance, that people in relationships with more self-compassion are more giving and intimate with their partners and were able to give to their partners and were willing to compromise and also really importantly, it reduces burnout. So, it's whether you are parent or you are professional caregiver, if you if you give and give and give to others, and you are mean to yourself, you will burnout. So self-compassion again it allows you to refill your battery, so to speak, so that you can sustain giving to others, so that's one myth. Probably, the biggest myths that stands in the way more than anything else is the myth that it's going to undermine your motivation. You need to be hard on yourself, crack the whip in order to achieve and if you're compassionate, you will lose your edge. It's like oh well, that's good enough, right? It's totally false. So, first of all, how high your standards are, like whether you want to be a professional athlete or maybe your goal is not that high. How high

your goals are has nothing to do with self-compassion. If it's important to you, if you want to be A top, number one professional athlete, you're going to want that whether or not you have self-compassion, the whole difference is what do I do when I fall slightly short of goals? Do I beat myself up? Do I call myself names, and if I do that, what is actually going to happen is it's going to undermine my motivation. I'm going to lose self-confidence, I am going to create a lot of anxiety for myself, I am going to develop fear of failure, I might procrastinate because I don't want to risk calling myself names. So it actually works against successful motivation. But if you are self-compassionate, what it does is okay, I didn't reach my goals. Well, I would like to reach my goals not because I'm inadequate if I don't, but because I care about myself and I want to be happy, I want to be well, and so what that means is, well, it's okay to fail, everyone fails, it's only human to fail. Here's the key. What can I learn from this failure right? How do I grow from this failure, so what self-compassion does, and it's so important, especially in business context when people talk about learning from failure, failure being the best teacher and yet no one wants to fail, but how can you learn if you do not fail right? So what self-compassion does is, it makes it okay to fail, but it also means that I want not to fail. What can I do to help? What can I learn from this situation? How can I grow developing a growth mindset? The idea that I can do better if I try harder or if I learn new skills and it's associated with quit, you know, I'm going to keep trying even if things are difficult, so it increases motivation, makes it more sustainable, and really importantly allows you to learn from your failures, which is so important to grow.

**Jen:** Those are all really good, and I feel like you answered like the next three questions I was going to ask you all in one, so thank you for that. So, is self-compassion, is it a skill? Like can we build a habit of self-compassion if we practice it? Like how does that work?

**Kristin:** Yes, absolutely. So, I have to be honest and say that it's not entirely natural for many people especially if you grew up in an environment where you know criticism or self-criticism is modeled for you and then the other thing is that when we fail, we feel inadequate, we tend to feel threatened and so we go into, fight, flight or freeze mode, but because we're the problem, with this more inadequate, that we find ourselves thinking if we beat ourselves up or control ourselves and do better or flee into that sense of shame or we freeze and we get stuck. This is actually natural reaction to threat. If your best friend loses her job, you aren't so threatened. You're actually more able to do another system, which is the care response which actually develops for other people, like the ability to tend and befriend, be there for others when they need you, to be warm and responsive, but that system evolves more to care for others with the threat defense system is more relevant to how we keep ourselves safe, so we have to do a little hack, so it doesn't feel entirely natural first, but it absolutely is possible. We just need to practice it, and the good news is, we already know how to do it right? We already know how to be warm and supportive and compassionate toward others. We have a template there. It's not like it's a new skill. What's new is we have to remember give ourselves permission to use this skill with ourselves.

**Jen:** Give me some examples. What are some specific examples of how to practice that like in our daily lives?

**Kristin:** Yeah, okay, let's say you've got a really important podcast that you'd like to get on and your computer crashes, and probably because something that you did wrong, okay? Just a totally hypothetical example, so one way would be to say "Oh my Kristin you're so stupid. I can't believe you. You blew this really important, we really wanted to do this, you should have updated your operating system, it's your fault." Okay so I might do that, but is that really going to help? If that can help the

situation as it can help the podcast go better, it's really just going to harm me right? So what would I say if my best friend said, hey Kristin, "You know, I had this really important podcast and my computer crashed, would I say to her to help her through it? "You stupid fool, you should have updated your browser, it's your fault?" No, I'd probably say, "Hey first of all, it's not that big a deal if you go on the phone instead, it happens to everyone. You've been really busy. I know intuitively that that's going to be more helpful, and so to practice it, all I've got to say is would I say this to a friend? if the answer is no, what would I say to a friend and then you just try it out for yourself. So, that's one way of using the language of the supportive friend. There are also other tricks like physical touch, because our body has evolved to interpret warm, caring touch as a signal of compassion. So, you can put your hand on your heart, your face, to just give yourself some kind of warm, supportive gesture and that actually helps calm your body down, which allows your mind to follow. So, we've actually developed a program called the mindful self-compassion program and I think we have 37 practices and exercises. We've got some guided meditations we can do. It's definitely a learnable skill. We know from the research that gets better with practice. The more you do it, the more self-compassionate you are. The good news is it feels like almost anyone can learn it. With some people, say your parents are really harsh on it, it's almost scary to give yourself compassion because the signals of care got fused with signals of fear. What we know is with the help of a good supportive therapist, you learn to give yourself that warmth and support and unconditional acceptance that maybe you didn't receive as a child. It may take a little work. It may take a little longer, but absolutely it is possible.

**Jen:** How does practicing mindfulness or something like the loving kindness meditation I know that's directed towards others, but I'm assuming you could do it with yourself too, right? Like how does mindfulness make us more open or better at being self-compassionate?

**Kristin:** Mindfulness and loving kindness aren't exactly the same as self-compassion, but they're really related, and what we know is that typically mindfulness practice increases self-compassion. Self-compassion practice when you make it explicit like "How do I treat myself kindly when I suffer" is perhaps a little more effective. So mindfulness is accepting things as they are. I'm trying, not doing system which makes them worse, having a nonjudgmental attitude toward yourself and around situations that arise. So when you practice mindfulness, first of all, it helps reduce self-criticism, because you are being mindful instead of resisting. It naturally opens your mind, opens your heart, and it makes it easier for self-compassionate feelings to arise. Having said that, it's does not necessarily entail explicit warmth. You don't necessarily have to put your hand on your heart and face, I'm so sorry, Kristin this is so hard and I'm here for you, right? That's almost an extra step which strengthens mindfulness, but remember, mindfulness is part of self-compassion. You actually can't be self-compassionate if you aren't mindful, right? So if you're reactive and just like running with the storyline and how horrible you are, how horrible life is, you actually can't give yourself compassion. You need that perspective to give yourself compassion. So they're related, but they aren't exactly the same and then loving kindness also very related. Loving kindness is benevolence or goodwill towards yourself or others, right? You can have loving kindness toward others, towards yourself. The big difference here is compassion necessarily entails suffering just by definition and often when suffering is present, it isn't so easy to be kind especially if you are suffering is like that big mistake you just made. They say when loving kindness meets suffering and stays loving, that it manifests as compassion.

**Jen:** I love that.

**Kristin:** It's like the sunshine, yeah, so the sunshine, the tears of suffering, the rainbow of self-compassion appears they say. So it's like the same engine, but can it stay, loving, warm, benevolent even when you're blaming yourself or you are feeling inadequate in some way. And if so, it manifests as self-compassion. But both practices help, we know for this empirically both practices, kindness meditation and mindfulness meditation increase self-compassion.

**Jen:** I just learned something new too because I have always practiced loving kindness meditation towards others but never towards myself, so there you go.

**Kristin:** Yeah and so you could include yourself as one of the targets. A lot of people have a hard time feeling loving kindness toward themselves. They feel awkward. So the way we teach it in our program we have you first think of yourself with someone you love, like your pet or your grandmother. Then you wish both of you well, and then you let your pet or your grandmother go and you just focus on yourself, you need to get the juices flowing. Yeah, so you need to get the juices flowing for other people. The same thing with self-compassion. You may first think of what you would say to a friend where it is very easy. You get the ideas flowing, you get that warmth going, to get the oxytocin and the opiates going and then you just turn it inward. You tuck yourself in and it seems to be a pretty effective technique.

**Jen:** I love that. So let's talk about others in our life. How can we help others in our life? Develop self-compassion, be more self-compassionate to themselves, that doesn't make sense. How can we teach others? Do they need to learn it on their own or can we help them, and then maybe especially with kids, can we help our kids cultivate self-compassion and how do we do that?

**Kristin:** Absolutely, and the number one way is modeling it, right? So in other words, you know may be you are kind and compassionate to your child, but when you drop that glass, you go, "Such an idiot". So, what are you modeling? So if you model for your child what it sounds like to be self-compassionate, "Oh dear, I'm so upset, I really like that glass. Oh well, it is only human, you know, clean it up, it's okay." And so the more you model those messages of warmth, understanding, acceptance, and also motivation when we need it, then children will get the message that that's a good way to talk to yourself. So and then you can also talk explicitly to children about self-compassion and the easiest way really is through the idea of friendship. So, by about seven years old, children are really learning about what it means to be a good friend, and you can just add in there, make sure you're also good friend to yourself, right? It's important to be a good friend to yourself as well as others. Those are two ways you can teach it to kids.

**Jen:** And adults I would assume.

**Kristin:** And adults. You don't want to shove this down anyone's throat, right? If people feel awkward or they don't want to feel like they shouldn't have to or they are forced to do it or they're doing one more thing wrong if they are not self-compassionate. Certainly, giving people permission to be kind, supportive to themselves, helping allay these misconceptions like it's going to make the weak, it's going to make me selfish, it's going to undermine my motivation--can really help them give it a chance.

**Jen:** What about self-compassion in the workplace, especially when there's so much pressure to not make mistakes or if we work in a culture where we don't feel psychological safety and how do we, and we are constantly under pressure to be perfect, although we can't.

**Kristin:** Well, I know that's the thing, like the culture yeah sure they can try, but they are not going to make human beings into robots, well, they might someday, but right now human beings. And so

expecting or saying mistakes are not acceptable does that really help, right? Because you can make a mistake whether or not people think it's acceptable. The real big key is how do you respond to that mistake? Does it derail you? Do you get overwhelmed by shame? Do you criticize yourself? You get so upset that you can't actually learn anything. That's actually not going to help you recover. It's not like if you're self-compassionate you're going to make more mistakes. If anything, you'll make less mistakes because you'll have more resources, you'll be calmer, you are going to be more supportive towards yourself to help. Then if you do make a mistake because you are only human, you aren't a robot. It means you'll be able to recover much more quickly. There is research in the workplace showing that, for instance, reduces employee burnout, reduces employee turnover, it increases job satisfaction because you know if you say to your employees, it's not okay to be human and they are human, what kind of work environment is that? It's just impossible. Employees who are more self-compassionate, they are able to deal with the stress more effectively, be more satisfied with their job, and stick with it even if it gets hard, be motivated when they fail, keep trying, they have more grit, etc. So it's good for companies and good for employees and leaders as well of course.

**Jen:** That's where I was going to go. As a leader, other than role modeling, self-compassion, how do I create an environment that promotes self-compassion, right? And that that helps people develop their own self compassion and allows for them, to I don't even want to say mistakes, allows for them to be human.

**Kristin:** You might say allows for them to learn effectively from their mistakes. We know mistakes happen and we know in the business environment, learning, recovering and growing, that what it's all about, right? So that's something I think leaders can do just by communicating that...those values, right? We aren't going to expect you to be perfect, but we are going to expect you to be open to learning from your mistakes. If you just try to blame other people or hide it, it's not going to help anyone. So it's okay to make mistakes as long as you really try to learn and grow from them. That's part of the culture. So, we developed a self-compassion training program at Dell Children's Hospital. We started training people there and we really saw a culture shift. Not only were the individual nurses and doctors who took the training more self-compassionate. They started signally to people when they made a mistake, 'hey it's okay, it happens to everyone. It's ok. How can I help or think in more constructive criticism, as opposed to name calling.' It really did shift the culture in a really powerful way so that the culture became one of self-compassionate, and by the way, all the parents then who were taking their kids to the Children's Hospital said, "Hey where can I get some of this? This is great."

**Jen:** So it's contagious. You are saying self-compassion is contagious in all the right ways.

**Kristin:** There's a research paper called self-compassion is contagious where they found that again modeling out loud helps other people be more self-compassionate. Their culture doesn't support it, so it really is a culture shift that we need to make. We need to help each other work with our mistakes as opposed to thinking we shouldn't be having them and we should all be robots. It just isn't so. We are human, like it or not

**Jen:** Yes, we are and we should celebrate that.

**Kristin:** I like it. I do not want to be a robot.

**Jen:** I do too, so we talked about self-compassion myths. What are some common pitfalls for people when they get stuck, when they're trying to be self-compassion or practice self-compassion. Like what do people typically get stuck on and how do they overcome that?

**Kristin:** Yeah, that's a good question, so a couple things. One, there's actually a phenomenon called backdraft that often arises for people. And so, this is a term we borrow from firefighters who backdraft when a house is on fire, you open up the doors of the house, the air rushes in, the flames ignite, and flames are shot. It can be actually quite scary. A similar thing can happen when we practice self-compassion, because maybe our entire life we close our hearts down and numb ourselves out just to get through daily life. And then we start opening the doors and you might say the care, the concern, the love rushes in and the old pain rushes out. And people think they're doing it wrong. In fact, they're actually doing it right. It means the old stuff that we've shoved down in the recesses of our subconscious are starting to emerge so that it can be healed, but we have to go slowly. We don't want to overwhelm ourselves. Sometimes we don't want to go to the most difficult, painful emotions we have right away. We want to get help perhaps or just dip our toe in the water and go slowly in a slow pace, so that's really common backdraft occurs, it should occur. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong, it's just a natural part of the healing process. You know like when your hands go numb shoveling snow and they start to warm up, they can hurt. So that's one thing. But it's not really a pitfall but people think it's a problem and you have to be careful with it, especially if you have the trauma history. Like I said before, it can be scary to practice self-compassion and it can help to have a therapist walking through it, so that's one thing. Then, another thing that happens is sometimes we're clever little monkeys and sometimes we think that, ah okay, I can use self-compassion as a tricky new strategy to make my pain go away. Maybe if I am self-compassionate then I won't make mistakes and then I won't have difficult experiences. It's like I'll throw some self-compassion at it my burnout will be cured or my relationship is cured. You know, it is like we try so hard to fix things all the time.

**Jen:** It's the magic pill.

**Kristin:** Yeah sometimes people assume it's the magic pill. It's more like a secret sauce. It makes everything taste better, but it's not like sugar coating does that makes sense?

**Jen:** It makes sense.

**Kristin:** The pain is still here. We're still imperfect. Life is still imperfect. It's a way of accompanying us through that imperfection, as opposed to some surreptitious way being perfect after all.

**Jen:** It reminds me of Dan Harris' 10% why he calls his book "10% happier", right? It's not the magic pill, but it will make you 10% happier.

**Kristin:** Yes, that's right, that's right. Yeah, and it will make it easier when the difficult things occur, that's for sure, but it won't get rid of pain and it won't make you perfect, but it will help.

**Jen:** So I have one final question for you. So, is there a way to practice self-compassion when you're doing well, right? When things aren't difficult or painful. So what does that look like and should you be practicing self-compassion when things are going well?

**Kristin:** Yes, so on the three components of self-compassion, which are mindfulness, kindness and a sense of common humanity are equally relevant when things are going right as they are with things



going wrong, but in this case I call it self-appreciation. So it's not really compassion because there's no suffering present, but we still need to first of all be mindful when things are going right and usually they aren't actually. If there is no problem, I don't have to fix. I'm not going to give it any of my working memory space, right? So you have to notice good things about ourselves or things that are going right in our life. Being kind to ourselves means actually being grateful, being grateful to ourselves. Wow, that's a hard one. "Well, that was a good job I did" or "That was a kind act I did" or "That went well" or again being grateful for what is in your life, the good things as well the bad things. That's part of kindness. And then really important common humanity, right? So remembering that life entails good as well as bad. So, in other words, you do not think well of yourself as a way to think you are better than others. It is just like okay this is just one of my good qualities. All people have good qualities as well as bad qualities and when we feel connected to others and their successes, it doesn't create that sense of isolation, which can almost make it difficult when you have success. Because they say it is lonely at the top. So with self-appreciation you can appreciate your success but not in a way that makes you feel cut off from others or superior to others, but actually just connected to others celebrating your successes, of everyone's successes and the fact that we all have good qualities. So the three components are always relevant but they feel different when suffering is present or not. It's like that same thing I told you, when the sunshine of loving kindness meets the tears of suffering, the rainbow of compassion appears. But the sunshine is the sunshine either way.

**Jen:** What's the difference, if I think about self-appreciation, how do I make sure that I'm not just stroking my own ego.

**Kristin:** Ironically, there is not a lot of self in either self-appreciation or self-compassion, the ego isn't involved. This experience is arising. This experience is connected to lots of other people's experience, you know, the life and culture and time and history and all these other factors. When suffering arises in this experience, I can be kind and feel connected. When happiness or success arises, I can be kind and appreciate it. It's really personal. It's not about me--defining me as a failure or defining me as a success. It's more just again coming every single movement whatever experience arises, painful or pleasant, success or failure until we deal with ourselves with an open heart. And when you do that, we don't really have to worry so much about if its stroking my ego. It's not about me as compared to you. It's just like, oh that was a nice thing that you did or that I did or someone else did. It's just taking time to be grateful for what's good in our life. We don't cling to it or identify with it if that makes sense.

**Jen:** It makes total sense and honestly I can't think of a better way to end this podcast because that whole piece was just amazing and awesome and I think I needed to hear it. I know every single one of the listeners needed to hear it too, so thank you so much for this really meaningful conversation. I got so much out of it and I'm super energized by it. So, even with all of our technology issues, we made it happen.

**Kristin:** Even with my crap computer. Yes, I appreciate that. I appreciate you and myself.

**Jen:** I'm so grateful Kristin could be with us today to talk about self-compassion. Thank you to our producers, Revit 360 and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more. If you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter @Jenfish23. We're always open to

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