

Author Talks: Kristin Neff on harnessing fierce self-compassion

Kristin Neff discusses how women can balance tender self-acceptance with fierce action to claim their power—in the workplace and beyond.



In this edition of *Author Talks*, McKinsey's Raju Narisetti chats with Kristin Neff about her new book, *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive* (Harper Wave, June 2021). Neff, a pioneer in the field of self-compassion research, presents ideas that expand the notion of self-kindness and its capacity to transform lives. An edited version of the conversation follows.

On being a ferociously compassionate mess

Life is messy, right? The human condition is an imperfect one. And one of my favorite quotes is that “the goal of practice is simply to be a compassionate mess.”¹ In other words, that should be the aim of our life: to be compassionate mess. So there are really two ways we can show ourselves compassion. There's tender self-compassion, and there's fierce self-compassion.

Tender self-compassion is the ability for us just to be with ourselves as we are—in all our messiness, in all our brokenness, in all our imperfection—and also to be open to the pain of life. When we do that with compassion, it makes a huge difference in our ability to cope. Yes, we can't always get it right, and life's certainly not going to always go right for us. But when we can hold our pain and our struggle and our difficulty with compassion, it gives us the emotional resources we need to really survive and get through.

But it's not just tender self-compassion we need get through the mess of life. We also need *fierce* self-compassion. In other words, we don't want to just be complacent about this mess called life. We also want to do what we can to change things for the better, not only inside ourselves, but also outside of us. Part of fierce self-compassion is fighting for justice, drawing boundaries, motivating change. This is also a really important part of compassion as we wade through the mess of life. The main theme of the book is that we need to balance this fierce and tender approach to ourselves and our lives in order to be ultimately strong and resilient and effective.

Unleashing our fierce side

Is the challenge self-compassion or fierceness?

My research shows that the vast majority of people are significantly kinder and more compassionate to others than they are to themselves. For women, it's 86 percent, and for men, it's 67 percent. It's especially hard for a woman because women are really socialized to be kind and giving to others and not necessarily themselves. There's good news and bad news in that.

The bad news is, most of us aren't in the habit of being compassionate to ourselves, so it is a little bit difficult. It comes quite naturally to us when we're compassionate to our friends, when our friends need our support. Many of us haven't even thought about the fact that we can show ourselves the same kindness, care, and concern as we show those we care about.

But the good news is, it's actually not that difficult to be self-compassionate. Yeah, it may feel a little bit weird. It may feel a little awkward. Maybe it feels a little phony at first. But we already know how to do it. We already have the template and the well-developed skills to know how to be warm, supportive, and encouraging, how to use constructive criticism. So all we really need to do is give ourselves permission to make a U-turn and learn to treat ourselves the same way.

It's not hard. It's more about some of the blocks that stand in the way. For instance, we think that if we're kind to ourselves, we're going to be lazy and self-indulgent and lose our motivation or become weak. And again, the research shows it's the exact opposite. The kinder we are, the stronger, the more motivated we'll be, and the more we're able to give to others. So it's really just a mind shift that we need to make.

I knew all the benefits self-compassion gave us. But with this book, part of what I wanted to do is talk about how self-compassion can be used in realms

¹ Rob Nairn, from various lessons on meditation.

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that maybe we haven’t thought about so much. And one of the most important realms that this book is really predicated on is the ability of self-compassion to help women, in particular, reclaim their fierce side. Unfortunately, gender-role socialization makes it hard for a woman to be as fierce as we may need to be in certain situations: to stand up for ourselves or to draw boundaries. People don’t really like fierce women. They especially don’t like angry women, which disempowers us because anger—when it’s harnessed for good, when it’s harnessed for alleviating suffering—is an important aspect of self-compassion.

I started talking to women about the role that fierce self-compassion played in their lives or just the role of fierceness in their lives. And I was really surprised by how many women said that they absolutely needed permission to develop their fierce sides. Just understanding that we can frame fierceness—even anger, drawing boundaries, meeting our own needs, as opposed to continually giving them up for others—as an aspect of compassion makes a huge difference for women in our ability to reclaim this fierce side of ourselves. And I was really touched by how much women shared in terms of the ability that owning their fierceness had to really change their lives.

On practicing ‘gender judo’ at work

In the book, I quote some research by a professor at UC Hastings Law, Joan Williams, who talks about

the need for women to practice what she calls “gender judo.” Judo is a martial art where you basically have to use your opponent’s momentum to defend yourself in order to make sure that you don’t get knocked over. And she argues that women have to do this in terms of balancing how we express the different sides of our nature at work.

Women aren’t allowed to be fierce. Gender-role socialization shows that women are supposed to be tender and nurturing—and not fierce. The research on women’s success at work is really quite disheartening. You have to be competent and kind of fierce and stand up for yourself and your ideas in the workplace.

People don’t like women who are too competent or who stand up for their ideas because they assume that a competent woman isn’t nurturing, and we like nurturing women. And unfortunately, one of negative consequences of that is, women aren’t promoted as much or paid as much, because of this perception that a competent woman—which she needs to be to succeed—is not likable. And so we tend not to promote or pay unlikable people as much, in general.

What Joan Williams argues is that one way women can overcome this is by practicing balancing our fierce and tender sides. So when you promote yourself, you maybe say, “Yes, I have had this great accomplishment; these are my successes,” which is

needed to get a salary raise. But then you combine it with something very personal, maybe praising someone else at work: “This other person did such a great job as well.” If we’re just too tender at work without any fierceness, people won’t think we’re good at what we do. But if we’re too good at what we do without being tender, people won’t like us. And so, yes, it’s practical. It makes sense. But in a way, it’s just kind of heartbreaking that we have to do this.

Men don’t have to worry about balancing their fierce and tender sides at work. They can be strong. They can be angry. People like them for it. They think they’re competent. Men don’t have to use part of their working memory space to always be thinking, “How are people judging me?” or “Was that too assertive?” And women do. It’s sad, but it’s true. For a woman, that’s why tender self-compassion is good. We need to honor the pain of it. We need to honor the pain that we can’t really be our full, true selves at work. We have to constantly manage these gender-role expectations.

One of my hopes for this book is that more and more women really learn to own both their fierce and their tender sides and are able to express them more authentically. And maybe—eventually, in our granddaughters’ generation—they won’t have to worry so much about consciously battling gender-role stereotypes.

Bringing balance to the workplace

Are there lessons for men and organizations here?

The book is written for women, primarily, to help them honor their fierceness and bring it into balance with their tenderness, even though that goes contrary to gender-role socialization. So it’s especially helpful for women. But the idea of balancing fierceness and tenderness is useful for all people, regardless of your gender identity. And it’s especially useful in work contexts.

You can also call it “agency” and “communion”—in other words, the kind of go-getter mindset, conquer-things mindset, with the accepting, friendly, more emotionally sensitive mindset. We know from the research that balancing those is good for all people. For instance, leaders who can combine both—who can show emotional sensitivity, emotional intelligence, in the workplace in addition to being very strong and competent—are considered more effective leaders.

People like leaders who can balance the fierceness and tenderness more. So when you can be honest about, for instance, dealing productively with your failure instead of just beating yourself up and shaming yourself for your failure, if you can be vulnerable and open to that failure, that’s actually going to allow you to learn and grow from your failure.

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The balance of fierceness and tenderness is good for everyone in the workplace. Research shows that people who can be their whole selves in the workplace and treat themselves with kindness and support are less stressed on the job. They're less likely to suffer burnout. There's lower levels of turnover, for instance. People are more productive.

These two sides of our nature are really important for all people. And they are important in any context—whether it's due to just the culture of work and business or gender-role socialization in particular—that makes us only half human, that doesn't allow us

to draw on every side of us. That includes the strength that comes from emotional tenderness and vulnerability and kindness and also the strength that comes from this fierce, competent, powerful—as I like to call it, “mama bear”—energy.

One of the reasons I think this book would be useful for anyone is because I have a lot of practices in it. And these practices are relevant for anyone, whether you're a man or a woman, whether you're a leader, whether you're an employee. It's really about being the most complete and effective human being we can be.

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