

Self-Compassion: The Pioneers

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Kristin Neff, PhD

The field of the psychology of self-compassion in America is largely the brainchild of [Kristin Neff](#).

Associate Professor of Human Development and Culture, Educational Psychology Department, University of Texas. Neff graduated with her PhD in Psychology from the University of California, Berkeley in 1997. She then traveled to the Far East where she spent time in India studying the ethical thought process of children. Upon returning to the US, her initial professional interests were the experience of authenticity and issues of self-concept. She spent several post-doc years at the University of Denver with self-esteem expert, Dr. Susan Harter. In 1999, she moved to her current post in Austin.

Neff first encountered the notion of self-compassion during the early years of her interest in Buddhism and mindfulness practice. She describes how, during her last year of work on her dissertation, one night at a Buddhist mindfulness class the teacher talked about the possibility of being compassionate towards oneself. Neff, who was going through a painful divorce at the time, had an epiphany of sorts. It had never occurred to her that she could apply the way she had been taught to be compassionate towards the suffering of others also to herself.

It was in her early years at the University of Texas that Neff decided to focus her professional efforts on the study of the psychological construct of self-compassion. In 2003 Neff published a seminal article on self-compassion, describing it in psychological terms. (Neff, K. (2003) [Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself](#)) In this article Neff offered her three-part definition of self-compassion (see [Self-Compassion Lesson I](#)) which has become the standard in the research literature. In addition, she compared and contrasted self-compassion to the self-empathy work of Judith Jordan, the efforts of earlier proponents of Humanistic Psychology, and dynamics of emotional regulation. (see [Self-Compassion Lesson I](#)) But perhaps most importantly, she gives a thorough analysis of the differences between self-compassion and self-esteem, a psychological construct first described by American psychologist William James in the late 1800s. Self-esteem emerged as a popular psychological theme during the late 60s through the early 90s, when research began to question it as a construct. Neff offers self-compassion as a viable new direction that addresses many of the same goals as self-esteem but, she would suggest, without the pitfalls. In the following video, Neff discusses the advantages of the construct of self-compassion over self-esteem.

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interested in meditation. He eventually returned to the US and enrolled in Psychology graduate school at Temple University where, in 1984, he received his doctorate. From there he moved north to the Boston area. In addition to his teaching and supervision activities, he began a private practice.

Living in New England, he soon found his way to the [Insight Meditation Society](#) in Barre, MA, where he learned Buddhist mindfulness practices (*vipassana*) and has been a committed practitioner ever since. He became a member of a monthly Buddhist psychology study group which later gave birth to the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy. Adding writing to his other professional activities, he is the co-editor of [Mindfulness and Psychotherapy \(2005\)](#) and author of the recently published [The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion: Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions](#). Dr. Germer is also the co-director of Harvard Medical School's annual "Meditation and Psychotherapy Conference." He brings a passion for the use of mindfulness in psychotherapy to his work with Neff on self-compassion interventions.

In the following brief interview of Dr. Germer by Dr. Ruth Buczynski, psychologist and a co-founder and president of the National Institute for Clinical Applications of Behavioral Medicine, Germer discusses the relationship between mindfulness, self-compassion, suffering and healing.

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On the other side of the Atlantic, another self-compassion pioneer has been working in parallel with Neff and Germer. Paul Gilbert, head of the Mental Health Research Unit as well as Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Derby in England. He is a past president of both the International Society for Evolutionary Approaches to Psychopathology (1992) and of the British Association for Cognitive and Behavioural Psychotherapy (2003). Gilbert is a prolific author with over 20 published books and more than 100 academic articles. His books include:

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Gilbert's early career focus led him to become an expert on depression and the treatment of shame. A convergence of two interests, evolutionary neurophysiology, on the one hand, and Buddhist philosophy and practice, on the other, carried him further to his current professional concentration, exploring the neurophysiology and therapeutic effectiveness of what he calls Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT).

Gilbert defines compassion as "the sensitivity to the suffering of self and others with a motivation to alleviate it." According to Gilbert, one underlying cause of human suffering is the different functionality of the reptilian and mammalian aspects of our brain. This inherited neurophysiology often results in inner conflicts between our emotions and our intellect. Gilbert emphasizes that an important point for clients to understand is that while it may be our individual responsibility to do what we can to regulate this conflict, the conflict itself isn't our fault. We simply were born with it. For Gilbert, the good news is that there is help for this self-regulation challenge. Gilbert has found that when clients can really take in this truth, it significantly undermines their tendency towards shame and increases their openness to self-compassion. He further notes that according to Buddhism "training the mind...can liberate us from this brain that we inherit." From Gilbert's perspective, one that he says is increasingly supported by empirical science, training in self-compassion is especially important towards this end. With this in mind, he has developed what he calls Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) and Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) In his training manual, available for free online at <http://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/Workbook.doc> Gilbert describes CFT and CMT as follows:

"(CFT is an) approach (which) guides therapeutic interventions especially for the development of self-soothing and self-compassion. The interventions themselves are derived from many other therapies and include the importance of: the therapeutic relationship, guided discovery, Socratic dialogues, inference chains, function analysis, chain analysis, maturation awareness, behavioural experiments, exposure and toleration, mindfulness, guided imagery, expressive writing,

and independent practice. CMT refers to the specific training and use of guided exercises to develop compassionate attributes of compassionate motivation, sensitivity, sympathy, distress tolerance, empathy, non-judging and non-condemning. CMT utilizes a range of exercises that focus on developing compassionate attention and imagery, reasoning and thinking, behaviour, and feeling. CMT refers to *the specific ways/techniques we can use to help us experience compassion, and to develop the various aspects of compassion for self and others.*" (p. 7)

Gilbert has been involved in several research projects exploring the efficacy of self-compassion interventions, including working with people with chronic mental health issues and those with eating disorders. See [Self-Compassion Lesson III](#) for examples of his research.

In July of 2011, Claudia Hammond, host of BBC's radio talk show, "All in the Mind," interviewed Gilbert and "Joe," also a professional psychologist, who is a compassion focused therapy client of Dr. Gilbert's, about self-compassion. To listen to the interview, especially, the first 11 minutes, click on this [link](#).

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Resources for Clinicians

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