

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health's Essential Conversations

KRISTIN NEFF, PHD

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality and Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is Essential Conversations. Our guest today, Kristin Neff is an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. She's a pioneer in the fields of self-compassion research. *She's the author of Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, and her new book is *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive*. You can read an excerpt from the book and an interview with Kristin done by Stephen Kiesling on the Spirituality and Health website @spiritualityhealth.com. Kristin Neff, welcome to Essential Conversations.

Kristin Neff: Oh, great. Thanks for having me.

Rabbi Rami: It's our pleasure. Hopefully, I'm not going to just reiterate what you and Steve Kiesling did because that will be not really what this podcast is supposed to be about. We'll try and see if we can go a little deeper into a couple of areas. One thing that interested me, there was actually a couple though I do feel somewhat out of my league because this book really-- even though you say the book deals with everybody, the punch of it is when it talks to and for the thriving of women.

I'm a little bit out of my league, but I'll do the best I can. You start the book out with a bold proposition. When you're talking about women here, you use the pronoun, we are, but the listeners should know you're talking about women. I'm just going to quote you. "If we're ever going to move beyond male dominance and take our proper place at the tables of power, we need to reclaim the right to be fierce." Tell me what you have in mind when you say, the right to be fierce?

Kristin Neff: The book is mainly about fierce versus tender self-compassion. Tender self-compassion is more the traditional female gender role, nurturing, soothing, being kind. No, of course, we normally do it to others. Self-compassion we give it to ourselves. There's also a fierce side of compassion that the Buddhists talk about. They talk about fierce compassion. This is when you harness the power of action to alleviate suffering. It means doing something brave.

A firefighter who pulls people out of a burning building is very compassionate. This is also a side of compassion called fierce self-compassion that we can turn in word and it's very helpful in terms of protecting ourselves, speaking up, standing up for our rights. However, if you look at historical gender role socialization, women are allowed to be tender, but not fierce, right? People don't like it when women are too competent, they don't like it when she's too assertive. They don't like it when she's too loud.

They don't like it. God forbid if she gets angry. This socialization just constantly toward tenderness and against fierceness really is part of maintaining our power and

equality. Women are taught to meet other people's needs not to meet their own. That means that we're pretty good in the helpmate role and perhaps not so good in the leadership role, at least historically. I think things were designed that way. That's partly why these gender roles develop because they were developed to keep the system going.

Rabbi Rami: Designed that way by the patriarchy.

Kristin Neff: Yes, it's not like there's one person who did it, but that's just how the system evolved in terms of--

Rabbi Rami: This is a natural selection. This is cultural determination or whatever you want to call it, in position.

Kristin Neff: Right. Women had to be subservient in order not to get in trouble. They can't own property, they didn't have power, they couldn't vote. Things have changed a lot, but that prohibition against fierceness and women speaking up, and getting angry it's still really powerful. That's what this book tries to address.

Rabbi Rami: I want to go back a little bit, pick up on something you said, but let me just talk about this first. Things have changed and changed for the better, you just said that. Tell me if this is fair. Things have changed and changed for the better but not changed fundamentally, that the lack of the right to be fierce has been imposed for thousands of years and that really hasn't really changed.

Kristin Neff: Some things have changed, for instance, gender roles. The terms they use in the gender role literature is communal and agentic, which really maps on to fierce and tender. There was a big study that examined whether or not this basic difference between female stereotypes being communal and males being agentic over a 30 year period and they found absolutely no change. Even though our place in society has changed, of course, we do have more power. Things are a lot more equal.

Things are a lot better than they used to be, but the stereotypes themselves haven't changed. The reason they're so damaging is because they operate implicitly. For instance, what we know is if we see a woman who is too powerful or she speaks well of herself, or is obviously competent, people don't like her because they assume that she's not nurturing and people like nurturing a woman. Women include in this just as much as men. It's not a conscious thing.

We just feel like I don't really like her she's too bossy or there's something about her I don't like. That's really when women are fierce it gets this negative reaction. That's why women are afraid to go there. The whole book is really about saying that, first of all, we need to claim this energy. Look at the Me Too movement. That's really women saying, "No, more. I'm going to stand up for myself. I'm not going to take it anymore."

We need to claim this fierceness but the way we can do it instead of being like men or acting like men, the pathway to this fierceness is through kindness, is through compassion. I call it our mama bear compassion, just like that powerful energy of a mama bear. She'll rip your head off if you attack her cubs is very, very powerful,

quite scary sometimes. We can actually harness that fierce kindness to protect ourselves and to stand up for the rights of women. Anyone who's oppressed, not just women.

Rabbi Rami: I just want to step back a second because where much of this is outside my area of expertise, whatever expertise I might have. You mentioned the idea of woman is I think you said helpmate, or help the--

Kristin Neff: Historically, yes, like the helper.

Rabbi Rami: I just wanted to pick up on that for a second, because that is a Western trope that comes from the book of Genesis and is a complete misread of the actual Hebrew. I'll just put this out there. The actual Hebrew, when it speaks of the woman and her relationship to the man in Genesis is Ezer Kenegdo. Ezer means helper, but Kenegdo means in opposition to, or in opposition to him, the O at the end is him. She helps by being his opposing character.

Kristin Neff: Interesting.

Rabbi Rami: The ideal in, as opposed to the idea. The ideal in the Hebrew is that she helps by showing him where he screws up. There's a whole literary theory about the early stories in Genesis or about the patriarchal-- the family stories in Genesis, where the matriarchal character is always the mover and shaker behind the scenes. These were written by women for women in an attempt to make fun of the men because the men in Genesis are oftentimes complete doofuses. The Hebrew is way more insightful. The literature around it from centuries and centuries ago is that the woman that is his helpmeet in the Genesis is actually the second woman that is created in the story.

The first woman's name was Lilith and she and the man, Adam. She and Adam fought all the time over sexual dominance. According to the rabbinic literature, Adam wanted to be on top when they had intercourse and Lilith wanted to be on top when they had intercourse. They went to seek God to see which is the right way to do it. God said, no the guy is on top, and Lilith said that I'm not playing and she leaves the garden. God creates Eve who is still fierce in the sense of Kenegdo being in opposition to but doesn't seem to have the same sexual issues that Lilith did. Anyway, just a little background that was triggered in my mind when you said that.

Kristin Neff: The thing is in the book, I try to get away from even calling these masculine and feminine because I think that's misleading. I like to use the metaphor of yin and yang, which also bounce on to fierce and tender. From the perspective of Chinese philosophy, yin is the more tender energy, yang is the more forceful, fierce energy. In that perspective, mental health is defined as having a balance between yin and yang, and when there's an imbalance, things get out of whack. It's really a problem that we've gendered these things. Men are just as harmed as women. They get some goodies and resources, in some ways they'd benefit.

On the other hand, the fact that aren't allowed to be tender. They aren't allowed to be sensitive. They aren't allowed to use compassion toward their own emotions and the emotions of others. That really harms men because the research shows compassion is tremendously beneficial for mental wellbeing, reduces depression, anxiety,

reduces shame. All those negative emotions. The problem is not so much men versus women. The problem is that we have these two essential life force energies, yin, and yang, and we've gendered these things. Everyone has their own natural balance of yin and yang, and who are we to put people in a shoebox and say, you can be this way, but not that way. It's unhealthy and from my point of view,

Rabbi Rami: Yes. On some level, it hurts both men and women.

Kristin Neff: It does.

Rabbi Rami: I agree. On another level, it benefits men to the detriment of women in the sense of the patriarchal.

Kristin Neff: Both are true.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Both are true. What's interesting in the book, you say, "Because I am a white cisgender heterosexual woman, undoubtedly, there will be unconscious biases in what I write." I'm just curious. The statement itself is a given, we all have our biases predetermined by our gender maybe, or sex, or whatever, our race. What I was interested in, when I read that and I may be just reading into this, but are there differences that you have found regarding fear self-compassion with regard to trans women or gay women or women of color?

Kristin Neff: No. There's no literature on that. Not really. There's actually not a lot of psychological literature on differences in self-compassion in general, but I suppose what I meant by that was riding this-- I'll give you an example. Actually, it turns out I did use a term in there that was unconsciously offensive, that someone called me out on it. I need to apologize. I was apologizing in advance for some of my-- You just get it wrong. It's so hard these days not to get it wrong. The whole point is, can we be open and accept it? I'll give you the example. In the book, I used the word sissy and I was using it in the way you learn as a kid, sissy is people who are weak.

Then someone said, "This is considered a homophobic slur." I'm like, "Oh, no." You know what I mean? Things like that happen, and of course, that's partly because I'm a cis-gendered, heterosexual. I wasn't as tuned into that fact as someone who probably had been teased by that term would have been. I was basically just setting up the fact that just to acknowledge yes, I'm going to make errors, and in fact I did. There are probably others in there that I haven't caught yet. Please forgive me, but just to say that I'm writing about gender and it's really hard to write about gender because of course gender is a construct and a lot of people don't even buy into gender. It was trying to weave a way to talk about gender role socialization without reifying, any of it. Also acknowledging that it's hard not to get it wrong sometimes.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. Everyone has confirmation bias, so everyone is going to be skewed one way or the other. When the person complained, were they compassionate about it, or were they just, "Got you?"

Kristin Neff: No, they actually were because there was someone who wrote to me, just sent me an email, and I actually responded back, and I said, "Oh, I didn't realize, I'm so sorry." Actually managed the next printing of the book, which should be hopefully pretty soon, it's going to change it. I said, "Thank you very much, and I

changed it." We actually really nice dialogue about it. She, I believe it was she seemed just happy that I listened, and took her point of view in instead of just saying, "Oh, don't bother me." If anyone else listening finds anything like that, please let me know. I'm trying to learn. I'm trying to grow. It's really hard to get it right.

Rabbi Rami: Do it with the same sense of compassion as this other person did.

Kristin Neff: Yes, exactly. She was just letting me know.

Rabbi Rami: Sometimes people will look for a mis-- I don't know if you want to call that a mistake, but look for something like that, just to one-up you and call into question the entire book and your entire life. That kind of thing. [crosstalk]

Kristin Neff: No. Also, if people have a lot of anger and they should have a lot of anger. For instance, as a white woman, I have to accept that for instance, when you commit an unintentional microaggression, it's like, yes, maybe you didn't do it intentionally but nonetheless, the whole entire history set up the person to react the way they did, so who am I to say what's overreaction or underreaction. In a way, it almost doesn't matter if it was intentional or not. The important thing is that we listen and we hear, and that we try to be present and compassionate. By the way, to ourselves, as well as others. I actually talk about this in the book.

Why think self-compassion is so important for social justice work because we are going to get it wrong and we need to be able to hold the pain of that and not give up and not just say, "Oh, forget it." If people are to this or to that, and just say, wow, that hurts. Okay. I do have unconscious bias and I don't mean to, but nonetheless is there, can I look at it and to be able to do that, you need to be brave and you need a lot of self-compassion to do that.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I think the word brave needs to be highlighted. You definitely need to be brave.

Kristin Neff: Yes. Because it wouldn't be easier not to go there. We tried that for many years and thank goodness we can't get away with that anymore. Whether it's sexism or racism or heterosexism. From my point of view, it's an amazingly wonderful thing that all of these things are coming to light but at the same time, it's also painful. We're going to fall down and make mistakes. Hopefully, everyone can have compassion for ourselves and others as we go through this process.

Rabbi Rami: I think it's painful in a way that-- Oh, now I can't think of an analogy. Having surgery to fix yourself is painful. It's painful, but it's painful for a good cause.

Kristin Neff: Good reason. Exactly.

Rabbi Rami: I don't want to go through the entire interview and not help people really grasp what you have in mind when we talk about self-compassion. You list three elements of self-compassion, mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness. Can you unpack those or please unpack those for us?

Kristin Neff: Yes. My model of self-compassion, which I came up with almost 20 years ago now, talks about these three elements. From my point of view, they all need to be there in order for compassion to be healthy. The first step of compassion

really is mindfulness. In other words, we need to be able to be aware of and present with things that are painful. Compassion in Latin means-- Compassion, suffer with. In order to be with ourselves in our suffering, we need to be able to turn toward it and acknowledge it. Often we don't want to do that.

We either want to stuff it away, pretend it's not there and you can't give yourself compassion if you don't acknowledge that you're in pain in some way, or the other extreme, we get fused with it. We get lost in it. When we're fused, we can't step outside of ourselves to say, "Hey, you're having a hard time, can I help?" Mindfulness is really the first step of self-compassion. Then, of course, we need to respond with kindness with warmth, with care, and that kindness can either take more of a tender form. Again, warm, **[unintelligible 00:17:43]**, accepting. sometimes it's more of a fierce form. Sometimes it's like a little kick in the butt. "Hey, you need to change something. This is making you unhappy, I care about you. That's why you need to change your behavior or change the situation."

The kindness element is there and that's more the emotional tenor of self-compassion. Then really important is the third element, common humanity. This is what differentiates self-compassion from self-pity. Self-pity is, woe is me? Common humanity, it's really the wisdom element of self-compassion. It's the recognition that we're all human beings, we're all imperfect. We all live an imperfect life, and when you go even deeper with it, we all impact each other. We're all part of this larger interconnected whole, and from that perspective, it doesn't make sense to have compassion for other people, but not for ourselves.

Rabbi Rami: Do you think it's harder for people-- We're not really talking just about people in general. Do you think it's harder for women to do the work of self-compassion given the fact that fierce compassion is, the tenderness is the default mode? Is it hard for women to do for themselves? Not by themselves, but for themselves?

Kristin Neff: Yes, it is more challenging for a woman, also even for the tender self-compassion. If you look at self-compassion levels, we find that women are slightly less self-compassionate than men are. That's basically because they feel less entitled to meet their own needs. Because they're raised with enormous self-sacrifice, whereas men are raised with the idea, "Hey, my needs are important. They deserve to be met." On the other hand, women are a lot more compassionate to others than men are because again, of the gender role socialization. It can feel selfish for a woman to be self-compassionate, and especially in the form of fierceness, things like drawing boundaries, saying no to others.

It can be more difficult for women because women are valued for saying, yes. We'd like helpful women. We'd like agreeable women. When you say no, sometimes people don't like you quite as much, and that's one of the things about self-compassion is you start liking yourself so you aren't so dependent on other people's approval, meaning you don't have to subordinate yourself to other people's wishes all the time.

Rabbi Rami: Which empowers you to say no.

Kristin Neff: Which empowers you to say no. The good news though, is that even though women are a little less self-compassionate than men. They're also more comfortable with the idea of self-compassion being a useful thing. 85% of the people that come to my workshops are women. It's because we know the power of compassion. We've seen it and we're compassionate experts toward other people. All we really have to do is make a U-turn and turn that well-honed skill inward toward ourselves. Then, unfortunately, because they're so socialized against being tender and compassion is a female thing, therefore it must be weak. Men feel a little less comfortable at least learning self-compassion, which like I say, harms men.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. That makes sense. When you say that women are, I can't remember exactly how it is, but experts in self, in compassion for others. I'm wondering if that's actually the case. Here's what I'm thinking, that women being experts in tender compassion, I wonder how much is lost if you don't have the fierce element, even when you're being compassionate toward others. I'm thinking of 12 step groups and things where you have compassion, but it's fierce in that you confront not just your own addictions, but it depends on the setup, but we're people are confronted by their own addictions and there's a fierceness to that. Do women have to learn-- I know you said they have to reclaim it. Do they have to actually learn what it is to be fierce?

Kristin Neff: Here's the thing. There is one area where we're very good at being fierce and that's toward our children. That's what I call it mama and mama bear. In some ways, it actually is a feminine energy, this fierce mama bear. We know it. We can feel it inside of ourselves. We're socialized to say don't use it for anyone except your children. We do have one sphere in which we can use it and tap into it. Again, it's not so much like you're inventing the wheel, you're just doing something you already know how to do it and using it with yourself.

Rabbi Rami: You're using the wheel of the drive on a different road than you would before.

Kristin Neff: Exactly. It's all a matter of giving yourself permission is the biggest key.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. I can see that. I can see that. That's going to require a fierceness all its own, giving yourself permission.

Kristin Neff: That's right. It takes some bravery to start the path of self-compassion because our culture doesn't support it, is one thing. Especially things like drawing boundaries, you do have to you might have to, with some people not liking you quite as much. Of course, the good news is as long as you balance fierceness and tenderness, there's no backlash in this. There's no negative consequences to it, but your spouse or your boss may not like it when you start drying boundaries hopefully they're okay with it. That's the thing. We can't be totally dependent on other people's approval because where has that gotten us? By the way, this applies to a lot of men as well. I'm talking about women, but a lot of men also really want the approval of others. I don't want to take the gender thing too literally. It's just the backdrop of patriarchy affects men and women differently, which is why it's relevant.

Rabbi Rami: We're focusing on women, but this applies to both men and women. One of the things that I don't think people will get from this. I was really taken with it

in the book that there's a strong physical touch component to cultivating self-compassion and you give a lot of exercises in the book where people can do these things. There's no way unless I'm saying there's no way you can always say, "Oh yes, there is." I don't think that we can go through some of these more intricate exercises but early in the book, I don't know if you have a copy of the book with you. I should have asked.

Kristin Neff: I do have it right next to me.

Rabbi Rami: Okay. That's good for two reasons. One is, gets turned to page 27, and on page 27, you talk about soothing and supportive touch. That thing comes up more than just here, but can you just talk a little bit about, you say some tender soothing options include one or two hands over your heart, cradling your facing our hands, gently stroking your arms. Why do these things affect? I did them too, and I attest that they actually make these physical actions create changes in your emotional state.

Kristin Neff: They do. It's actually very natural because touch evolved to be one of the most powerful signals of care. Because for the first couple of years of life, before babies have language, the primary way parents communicate a sense of care and safety to their infants is through touch. The whole system is designed to respond to touch as a signal of care. They've got settings where you can put your hand in a box, so you don't see the other person. There's someone touching you through a box. You can't see them. You know a lot about what type of touch when emotion is conveyed through their touch because we're very sensitive to it. Touch can be used to soothe, to comfort, to calm. Touch can also be used to give a sense of support and strength like I'm here for you. That type of more energetic touch.

The reason we talk about touch so much, just because it works through the central nervous system. It activates the parasympathetic nervous system, deactivate sympathetic, nervous system activity, things like cortisol, reduces cortisol. Sometimes your head can't go there. It's too full. The storyline of how awful you are, how awful the situation is. Touch cuts through all the chatter and goes directly to your physiology. Just like you a child being held by your parents. When you do that for yourself, your body doesn't really know the difference. That's why it's so powerful. You can feel it almost immediately.

Rabbi Rami: That's what happened when I tried the exercises. It's not like you have to do this for 40 days and then--

Kristin Neff: It was almost immediate. It really is.

Rabbi Rami: It really is immediate. Since you have a book with you and we are running out of time. I want to look at what a manifesto at the end of the book. Page 302, and there's so much material here. We can't go through it all, or even most of it. On page 302, you write, "As for myself, I'm entering a new phase, the wise woman, or crone years as this time is often called." Then you go on to talk about this. Then in the next paragraph, I'm going to ask you to actually read this for one I stopped trying. Read that paragraph for us and tell us what's going on with you now, as you hear it, maybe compared to when you wrote it, but what's going on with you now, when you hear that?

Kristin Neff: You want me to read that paragraph for one?

Rabbi Rami: Yes.

Kristin Neff: For one, I've stopped trying to understand my patterns and heal my wounds. I've realized that my ego and personality are functional enough. I don't need to understand my parts more thoroughly, although I'm grateful to the years of therapy that helped me reach that place. I've gotten to know and appreciate all aspects of myself. The part that's like a warrior with a drawn bow when I perceive someone to be violating the truth. The part that speaks authentically, even if not always diplomatically. The part that's hardworking and keeps going, even when things get difficult in life, and the part that can hold it all with love.

Rabbi Rami: Pretending you just heard this for the first time, what happens when you read that? What's coming up for you?

Kristin Neff: My thought was, I worked hard for that.

[laughter]

Like I say, I've done a lot of therapy, 20 years of therapy. I think there's a real place for unpacking your wounds and trying to work on aspects of your personality that are less functional. I'm also referring because, in many ways, my problem isn't that I'm not fierce enough. My problem is actually the opposite that I'm a little too fierce. Everyone's different, I'm a little more yang than yin. I've had to deal with that, given that women aren't liked when they're too fierce. I happened to be quite fierce in my personality. It's really about coming to terms with who I am at this point in my life. I did end my therapist.

I told my therapist, I think I'm good enough. He agreed. For me, I end the chapter with the phrase of becoming a compassionate mess. That's really my practice now. I'm still a mess. I'm maybe a little less messy than I used to be marginally, but I'm still a mess. I still make mistakes. I still get it wrong all the time, but I have learned to hold that mess with compassion. That's a really good place to be. When your heart is open, it almost doesn't matter what you're holding. You start to value the open heart more than actually getting it right.

Rabbi Rami: That's where I was going. I'm glad you lead us right to it. Compassionate mess. I love this idea and again, let's just be clear. This is after a long, 20 years, you said working on yourself with therapy, but still, so we don't want to short change anything is, all you got to do is this, and excuse yourself.

Kristin Neff: Yes, there's still work to be done.

Rabbi Rami: I love this idea. Stop trying to understand my patterns and heal my wounds. I've realized that my ego and personality are functional enough. That is brilliant because we can spend endless hours. You don't really lay on a couch for most therapy anymore, but you can spend endless hours on the couch. It becomes a narcissistic thing. Oh, I got to fix this. I got to fix that, and it's all this drama about fixing of self that eventually is functional enough and the culminating and the idea of a compassionate mess. That's very liberating.

Kristin Neff: It is liberating. It's really about transcending the self. You need a healthy self in order to transcend it. People talk a lot about that and hopefully, I'm at that phase of my life, where again, not perfect but good enough that I can focus on the transcendence and the love and the compassion and the humor of it all as well.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. That's something I'd love to explore with you too because I think that comes across, but we are out of time. That's a good place to end though because I think it ends on a very upbeat note. Our guest today, Kristin Neff is the author of *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive*. You can learn more about her work on her website selfcompassion.org. Kristin, thank you so much for talking with us on Essential Conversations.

Kristin Neff: Thank you.

Rabbi Rami: Essential Conversations with Rabbi Rami is the biweekly podcast of spirituality and health magazine. If you like Essential Conversations, please rate and review us on Apple podcast and subscribe to the show on your preferred podcast app. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithhealthmag. You can also follow me on the spirituality and health website where I write a regular column called roadside musings. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. Essential Conversations is produced by Ezra Bakker Truppiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

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