The self-compassion expert

Dr Kristin Neff – academic and writer

We talk to the professor whose work on kindness and self is redefining what it means to be a force for good in the world

interview *Molly Bolding*
photos *Justin Leitner (Score Head Shots)*

After the success of her first book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, written in 2011, Dr Kristin Neff noticed an odd trend: "People were confusing self-compassion with softness, nurturing, tenderness and complacency," she says, "and they didn't understand the fierce side, which is taking definitive action to alleviate our suffering." After another ten years of research, her new book *Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive*, published in July 2021, sets out a clear path for how we can benefit from a more assertive style of self-acceptance.

'Fierce self-compassion' may sound like an oxymoron, but it's clear to Dr Neff that acknowledging your power means accepting some ideas that, for a long time, have been seen as a contradiction in terms: "Men, for most of history, have been running the show, and I think we need some new voices," she says. "It's not that women need to be like men, we need fierceness *and* tenderness, we need to balance both, we need to integrate them. I call it 'caring force', because if it's not, it's brute force, and that's part of the problem." →





Throughout our interview, Dr Neff is keen to clarify that, when it comes to looking after ourselves, fierce self-compassion is less about 'mothering' and more 'mama bear'. In other words, she says "sometimes self-compassion means standing up for ourselves, saying no, drawing a boundary." Drawing on her own experiences – the breakdown of her marriage, encountering predatory behaviour in the workplace – Dr Neff explores the various ways in which our patriarchal systems affect women's lives and how the social conditioning women experience as they grow up prevents us from accessing our 'fierce' side. In particular, she looks at how something as simple as recognising our own worth, and making choices that prioritise our wellbeing, can help us in resisting the pressures of the modern world. "It's a radical act," she explains. "Self-compassion, in many ways, is revolutionary."

This book, unlike her previous one, is specifically aimed at women. It considers sociopolitical and feminist history and how all of this shapes the lives of women today and it's also filled with insightful personal anecdotes and practial self-compassion exercises based on Dr Neff's life and work as an Associate Professor of Human Development. Is it a magic wand to fight sexism? "No, self-compassion is not going to solve all of your problems, we also need to change systems: for instance, I think we need state-funded childcare in the US! Things like that also need to happen, but part of the way that happens is through people banding together, so the individual and the interpersonal are always related, it's not one or the other."

By placing accessible academic frameworks around personal exercises that encourage the reader to reassess important memories and apply some necessary self-compassion, Dr Neff's book embodies the famous feminist phrase, "The personal is political". Throughout the book, Dr Neff breaks down self-compassion into its base elements – kindness ("that's the obvious one"), mindfulness and common humanity – and illustrates how fierce self-compassion offers women, and all oppressed groups and their allies, a way to create a "connected stance" to combat structural issues. This is a big aim, so she is all too aware of the scepticism that her field sometimes faces. "Some people have criticised the mindfulness movement as being too much about personal wellbeing," she says, "but I don't think that's a fair criticism. If you talk to anyone who's prominent in that movement they'll also say, 'We need societal change.'"

Why aim this book only at women? Why do women need fierce self-compassion specifically?

I've always been interested in gender and gender equality, but then when #MeToo happened and I had my own experience with sexual harassment, it galvanised my focus. To see all of these women rising up and saying "We need to be paid equally," "We need to feel safe on

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the streets," I realised that part of what was happening was related to gender role socialisation. When men get angry, they're allowed to have this warrior energy, but they aren't allowed to be tender – and, by the way, this harms men enormously, too – but it also gives them more power because there's power in taking action. Women are encouraged to be tender but not fierce. I always use the metaphor of yin and yang because we need both masculine and feminine energies in our lives, but we've gendered these natural human responses to the detriment of everyone! That's the reason I wrote this book for women – you could write this book for men but they're coming at it from a different angle – men need more tenderness.

What are some of the myths you've come across about fierce self-compassion?

The number-one myth that stands in people's way is that self-compassion is going to undermine our motivation. People really believe that being hard on ourselves is going to help us achieve our goals and drive us to achieve. We used to believe this in terms of our parenting philosophy but the research shows that self-compassion is a more effective motivator than self-criticism. We really used to believe that harsh corporal punishment – physical punishment – was necessary to prevent a child from being spoilt. What we know now from the research is yes, it may get the child to comply in the short term, but you're harming that child in all sorts of ways – emotionally, psychologically – in the long run. It's the same with self-flagellation: it may motivate us in the short term but it's going to cause performance anxiety and fear of failure. Shame is not exactly the best 'get up and go' mind state – that's a really big thing to realise.

There are two beliefs that are a little bit gendered. Firstly, men are more afraid that self-compassion is a sign of weakness and, I hate to say, that's because it's associated with the female gender role and women have less power in society. That's why 85 per cent of people who come to my workshops are women. Secondly, the thing that gets in women's way is the belief that self-compassion is selfish. We're raised our whole lives with the belief that we need to be self-sacrificing, and that's also not true. The more we give to ourselves, the less burnt out we'll be, the more resources we'll have and the more we'll be able to give to others.

Finally, people also confuse self-compassion with self-esteem, but the self-esteem movement is actually quite different. Self-esteem is judging yourself positively, usually contingent on you being better than other people or feeling successful in your self. Self-compassion is an unconditional source of self-worth. You don't have to be better than anyone else – you just have to be a flawed human being like everyone else. →

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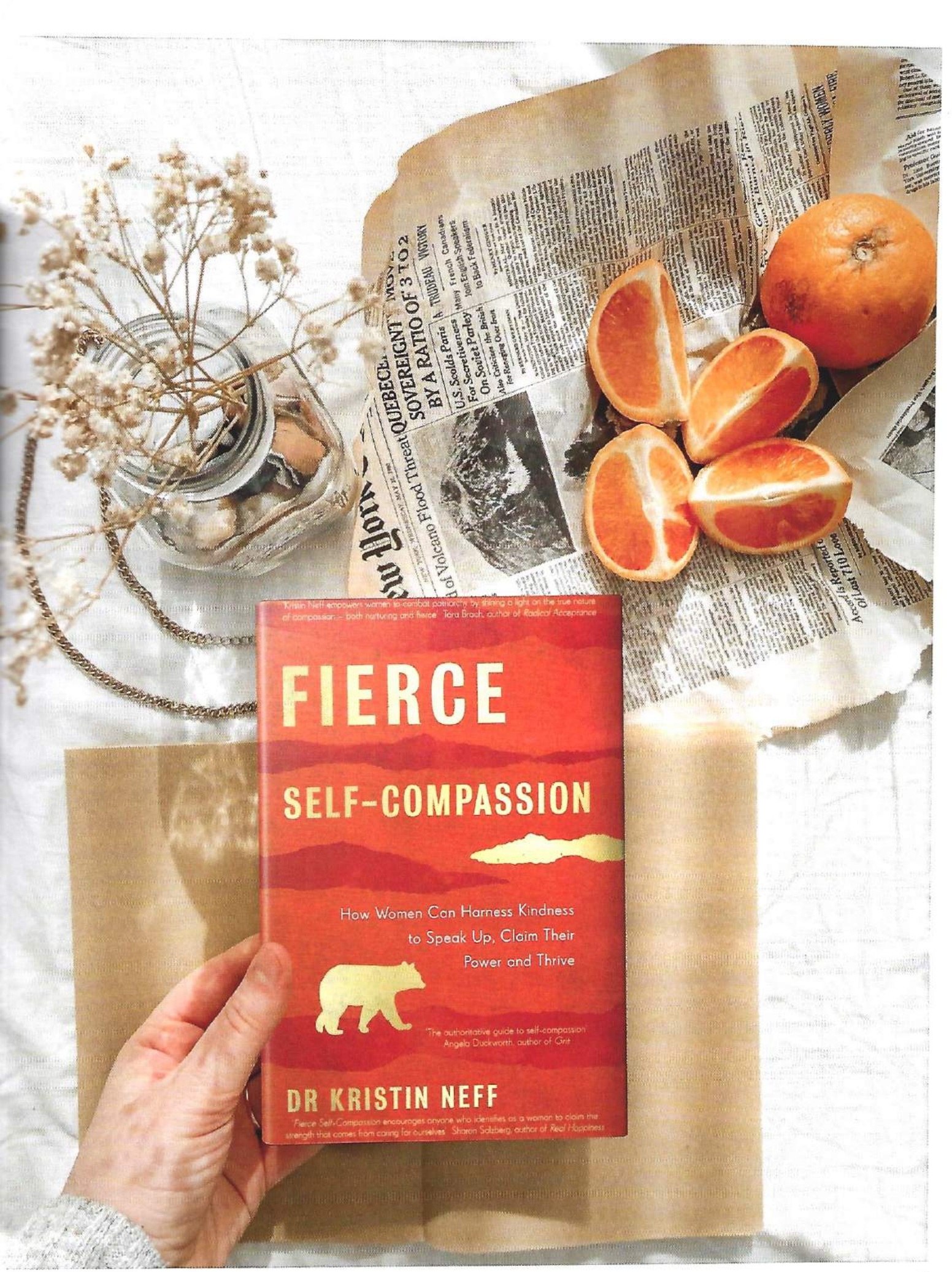
You talk towards the end of your book about your experiences of ageing, major life events like marriage and childbirth, and how self-compassion can be particularly valuable for women over 50. Conversely, how might young women benefit from this insight?
It's funny, when I was writing my book I didn't necessarily have a particular age in mind – I was writing for my young friends, my older friends, my peers – because I think these issues really accompany you your whole life. I'm a Gen X-er, and one of the things I know that is really changing is that with the younger generation the gender roles are relaxing. There's a lot more fluidity in gender roles now, and far, far more awareness around stereotypes, discrimination and conditioning, which is a wonderful thing.

My son likes watching 1980s movies and it struck me recently, when you watch them now, that they were so incredibly sexist. It's actually quite shocking. So many of the women were just arm candy for the leading men – that's basically a woman's worth – and I didn't even see it at the time when I was watching them as a teenager because that submissive female role was so normalised. So I think these conditioned gender roles have played a bigger role for women of my age and that highlighting these gender roles may be even more relevant to us. Perhaps many more women of my generation are still stuck within those conditioned roles that keep them disempowered. That's what I hope the book will achieve: highlighting ways in which playing the leading role in our own lives and putting our own needs first should be the norm and shouldn't come with a stigma.

What's one piece of advice you would give readers who want to add a bit of fierce self-compassion to their lives?
This is the one phrase that really, really helps me: "The goal of self-compassion practice is simply to become a compassionate mess." What that means is that the goal is not to get it 'right', the goal is to open our heart. That doesn't mean we'll stop trying to grow, but we give up the idea that we're going to 'become fiercely self-compassionate', and we realise that it's really about the journey and not the destination. ♦

For tips on self-compassion practice and exercises to try, as well as details about Dr Neff's online Self-Compassion Workshops, visit *self-compassion.org.*

Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive by Dr Kristin Neff (Penguin Life)


Kristin Neff empowers women to combat patriarchy by shining a light on the true nature of compassion – both nurturing and fierce. Tara Brach, author of Radical Acceptance
FIERCE
SELF-COMPASSION
How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive
"The authoritative guide to self-compassion" Angela Duckworth, author of Grit
DR KRISTIN NEFF
Fierce Self-Compassion encourages anyone who identifies as a woman to claim the strength that comes from caring for ourselves. Sharon Salzberg, author of Real Happiness