



HEALTHIER YOU

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[Season 1, Episode 7: How to Embody Self-Compassion](#)

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff with their healthiest lives.

MB: Hello, everyone! Welcome to the Healthier You podcast. I'm Megan Bergfeld, one of the clinical counselors in Work/Life Connections EAP. I'm happy to be here with you again. I am really excited to introduce our guest for this month, Natalie Dodd, is here. Welcome, Natalie.

ND: Thank you! I am so excited to be here.

MB: Very good. Natalie is another clinical counselor in EAP with me, and she is going to talk with us today about self-compassion, which seems to be an increasingly talked about concept in the therapy world these days. Natalie, you recently developed a self-compassion initiative for medical staff that includes learning about self-compassion and how to embody it as a coping strategy in times of stress. I think that is necessary information for healthcare workers everywhere. So, to start, can you tell us a bit about what self-compassion is?

ND: Yeah, absolutely. So, I want to make sure that I mention Dr. Kristin Neff, who is a researcher out of Austin, Texas. I see her as a pioneer of self-compassion, and I really see that she has made this concept of self-compassion a kitchen-table conversation. The way I describe self-compassion, and think about it, is it's really turning compassion inward. We are meeting ourselves where we are at, and it is bringing a sense of kindness and understanding if we make a mistake or we feel inadequate, instead of bringing in the sense of harsh criticism that so many of us carry around. So, it's learning how to give ourselves support and encouragement in times where we could be really self-judgmental or really self-critical. The gold standard and what you think of when you think of self-compassion is: "How would you talk to a friend in this situation?" So, in the situation, would you be offering a friend or a loved one more kindness than you are offering yourself? And, more often the answer is: "Yes."

MB: I know things I say to myself sometimes in my head, I would never dream of saying out loud, or to anyone else for that matter. We can be really kind of mean in the privacy of our own brains. So, how does self-compassion help us make that shift, from self-criticism to self-kindness?

ND: There are three main components of self-compassion. The first one is this concept of self-kindness versus self-judgment. So, something that's really powerful to understand and recognize is that when we are self-critical or in judgment of ourselves, we actually activate our stress response system. This stress response system is there for a reason, and it protects us. Usually, when we activate the stress response system, it is because of an external threat, right? We need to run from the bear, or something has happened, we need to protect ourself. What happens is that when we are self-critical or self-judgmental, we activate the stress response system and we become our own threat. We are the enemy that we have to fight. It is so damaging. And just imagine, when we are in times of stress, if we have this self-critical or this negative part that makes it so much harder. That makes you so much more stuck. Instead, if we bring this concept of self-kindness, what that does is it changes the narrative. We become our own ally. You know, in times of stress, what I would much rather have going into battle is somebody who is there saying that we are okay, that we are protected, that we are comforted, that we are safe, instead of having somebody on the sidelines saying, "We're terrible, you're doing it wrong, you're going to mess this up." That's fear, that's scary. So going into stress with self-kindness, I mean, oh my gosh, what an amazing way to be able to relieve something instead of making it even more punishing or damaging.

The next is this concept of common humanity versus isolation. You know, truly, it's recognizing that suffering and personal inadequacy is part of the shared human experience. It is not something that happens to just me. So, I'm sorry to say it, but we are all inadequate in certain ways. We are all going to make mistakes, and also the beauty of it is that we all have shared emotions to a certain extent. Megan, you've felt shame before, you've felt joy before, you've felt awe, happiness, everything across the board, right? So, have I. I've felt shame, I've felt joy, I've felt happiness, I've felt everything across the board. The difference is our experience of it is incredibly unique. The way that we get there, the circumstance, is incredibly unique. The actual emotion itself is not. So, with bringing the sense of common humanity, it is recognizing, oh my gosh, I'm in a moment of suffering. I'm feeling so much shame right now, but I'm not alone. I bet somebody else has experienced shame and it's not just me. It's not just me who is doing this, and it opens this opportunity for a sense of resiliency by bringing in community in times of stress. We open that up to a sense of comfort that instead, if we choose isolation and loneliness, we are in it by ourselves, and we need that sense of community to be able to get through hardships.

Then, the other one is mindfulness versus overidentification. So, the way I think about mindfulness is: how do we become the observer? Watch the movie instead of playing the movie. We are not in the movie; we are watching the movie. Mindfulness allows us to become the observer of our situation. It is bringing in a balance of experiencing negative emotions. When I think of negative emotions, it's those ones that we get really stuck in, kind of like the shame or the guilt or the grief. We get really stuck in it, and so there is negative emotions. How do we experience those nonjudgmentally in a way that is neither suppressed so we don't dismiss it, and we don't exaggerate it? We experience all these emotions in this face of resiliency. And, truly, a really harsh reality is understanding that we cannot ignore or dismiss our pain and feel compassion for it at the same time. That can't be done. So, we have to be able to experience it for what it is, and then offer compassion for it. And that brings us into another concept which is the yin and yang of self-compassion. So, with the yin side of self-compassion, it brings in the sense of nurturing and kindness, and tenderness, and slowness, and self-soothing. On the flip side of the coin is yang. It's like power; it's saying "no" in times of challenges; it's setting

boundaries; it's standing up for yourself. The way that Kristin Neff presents it, is this picture of this momma bear. There are two images of this momma bear. The one is the yin, nurturing, we are cradling our cub. It's soft. It's tender. Then the other is this yang, where momma bear's teeth are out, we're loud, we're standing, we're saying "no". So, there is both. We need both of those to be able to get through times of suffering and to get through challenges. And, when we learn how to utilize both, it gives this sense of balance in suffering. In any time in life, if we feel stuck in something or if we're overusing something, it's not going to be as effective than if we can come into this flow state and bring a sense of balance and we know we can lean on either. We can use both, so it's this sense of maybe I need to stand up and get loud and advocate for myself and say no, this isn't okay, this is unjust. But then, it is also saying to myself, okay, after I do that, how do I give myself some tender self-compassion of saying, "that was really scary, that was really hard, I'm sorry you had to do that. I'm sorry you had to use your voice like that, and I'm here for you, I support you." We can't do both simultaneously. It is knowing when to use either/or, right? And so, again, if we get stuck in one or the other, there can be this sense that I hear a lot, like self-compassion is only the yin or only tender. We kind of get stuck in this misconception of self-compassion is only the tender side, where a lot of us don't recognize that it has another side. It has both.

MB: Yeah. For sure. My many clients comment that self-compassion seems like it is too fluffy. They worry that they are going to become complacent or stagnant if they just try to be nice to themselves all the time. I don't think people, myself included honestly, have historically considered the yang side, or that self-advocacy side of the coin, to be part of self-compassion. Can you talk about some other common misconceptions of self-compassion?

ND: Yeah. Absolutely. You know, this concept of life is meant to have a flow state and balance, and so with what you are describing, there are moments that we get really stuck in a concept or a misconception of what something might be. With self-compassion, I hear a lot of "stuckness" and those kinds of misgivings, right?. I swoop in to say what it's not. You hear a lot of "people feeling stuck" and "self-compassion is selfish." I also hear a lot of people being stuck in just anything that is turned inward as self-care is selfish. That's such a misconception of what those concepts are, and I always go back to reflect this: when you're on a plane, every single time you get on a plane, what do you hear? You hear the flight attendant say the exact same thing, which is, "Put your oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on anybody else." That's what self-compassion is, it's putting your oxygen mask on yourself so that then you have the capability to help somebody else out. You know, if we're struggling for air, we can't help anybody else out. So, it's not selfish, it's life giving and it's what builds the sense of resiliency. It's putting that oxygen mask on ourself first. Another one that I hear is that self-compassion is just self-pity. It's kind of like self-compassion is like you just feel sorry for yourself. You just become the victim. You just sit in this, and you can't do anything about it. That's just not the case. It's that self-compassion is honestly, the antithesis of that in that self-compassion is a healthy motivator. It pulls us out of things that make us feel really stuck. It brings those three pillars we just talked about, right, like each one of those is what allows us to then be a healthy coach, or a healthy motivator in these times, that we really, really, really need it, and so self-pity is the opposite. What if we brought in the common humanity part? It's like bringing in community to rally around us, to support us, or bring in community where there is a felt sense of connection, that somebody has felt this before, and I can have this connection with somebody at a time that's really hard for me. And then another is that self-compassion will lead to self-indulgence, and I have this image where it's somebody who is sitting on their couch, in their cozies, eating a pint of ice cream, you know, binge watching Bravo. I mean come on, we've all done that. But there has got to be a balance to it. Self-indulgence, what I just described, that environment, it is so self-destructive. It's not useful and we are using it as a form of escape. We are using it to numb out, to

disassociate, to escape, to avoid. None of those things are going to be what's going to bring us out of the circumstance that we're struggling with. It's going to keep us stuck in it, and honestly, it's going to make long-term consequences that then we are going to have to deal with, even after this event has moved past. And so, again, it's like we've got to bring a balance in. Sure, sit on the couch, watch Bravo. You know, got to have my housewives, but at the same time, don't watch 15 reruns and don't respond to anybody when you know that you have some responsibilities you have to do today. Bring the balance in. And then, the last one is one of my favorites to talk about: self-compassion is going to make you lazy. And, I have so many conversations in this space of having the privilege of talking to medical teams, providers, and caretakers. We talk a lot about this concept that talking to ourselves any other way than the way we have been doing it with harsh criticism and judgment is going to lead to us being lazy. One of the ways that I bring it into the conversation is naming it. Like this inner critic got you somewhere. Right, like you're here. These are high stakes, this is something to be proud of, we made it to a really high bar. But if you recognize the only reason I think I made it here was because I was yelling at myself, I mean, oh my gosh, that is so damaging. It fosters a sense of worry and fear that we white-knuckle everything. I hear so many times, "I can't take in a compliment, but if I hear something negative, I'll think about it all day." Of course you will, because your inner voice is so critical and it's building this sense of fear and worry that your successes can be taken away from you on a dime, and if you make a mistake, they are gone. And so, what self-compassion does, is instead of being terrified that if I make a mistake I'm going to fall off a cliff and lose everything, it's just a little trip on the sidewalk. You know, we're okay, we're going to be able to just catch ourselves really quickly. We can catch ourselves really quickly if we bring in self-compassion. If we have this negative voice, it's yelling at us, telling us that we're lazy or that we're worthless, or whatever it is, we are going to fall off the cliff every single time. That it is so much harder to pull ourselves back. It would be a massive difference if you heard this voice inside of you saying, "I'm proud of you. I'm so proud of you, and that's not going to go away, even if there is a mistake or if you're not perfect right now." So, that's really the bulk of this, how we can get really stuck in thinking of the misconceptions of self-compassion. So, broadening it out and seeing that there is a massive difference in the lens of what self-compassion can offer. It is really powerful.

MB: For sure. I think, we work with a lot of really high-functioning individuals, right? They are under a great deal of pressure. I think they've had to hold themselves to this very high level of performance to move through all of these different levels of training that they've had, and to handle these big situations that come up. It breeds this expectation of perfection that simply is not realistic and then when we feel like we haven't met the expectation, we really just beat ourselves up. How do we cultivate a sense of self-compassion, particularly in a big health care setting like this?

ND: So glad you asked. You just teed me up to talk about the embodying self-compassion work that I'm really passionate about. So, for me, recognizing the population that is VUMC, it is finding simple and realistic ways to add in self-compassion on the ground level. So, I feel like there is a really big gap of support for medical staff, and there is this expectation, honestly, to be so unaffected by the work that we do, and be so unaffected from one case to the next. We're working in such high-stake situations that it's just not possible. We're not robots. We're going to feel. We're going to experience. We're going to be affected. We're going to be activated. So, for me, it's how do we jump in and care for this caretaker, and every single one of us are caretakers. You know, the role that you are in within the walls of VUMC, at work, you're a caretaker. Most of us probably also, I would bet, are caretakers outside of these walls. So, we are a well-rounded caretaker. It's just how do we caretake for ourselves? For me personally, how do I help caretake for those caretakers, in and outside of the workplace experience? So, I'm going to focus on workplace ways to be able to bring in self-compassion and embody it to be able to help with what I was kind of talking about. If we are affected by cases, and we do have crisis situations, and/or whenever

something has activated us, how do we caretake for ourselves in that moment to be able to build resiliency and foster this sense that we can move on to the next task that we have to do without going into burnout or having compassion fatigue? Let's get preventative about it, so that we don't then have those backend conversations that are only about how we're too far gone, and we're so burnt out.

So, if you're open to it, what I would love to do is kind of walk us through a snapshot of what I offer for the embodiment of self-compassion, guided meditation. Normally if I would do this in a different setting, it might be 15 minutes or so, but I'm going to do a quick kind of 5-minute example of what it might look like.

So, what I would like for us to do is put our feet flat on the ground, and just allow ourselves to settle for just a minute. I'm going to move through this a little faster than I normally would, but before I move into it, let's just take two rounds of breath as a community. Breathing in for a count of 4 and breathing out for a count of 5. And one more time breathing in for a count of 4, and breathing out for a count of 5. What I would like for you to do is to find a compassionate touch. I'm going to quickly run through three options. The first one would be putting one hand over your heart and allowing the other hand just to fall on top. Another might be giving yourself a butterfly hug, so wrapping your arms around and having your hand just land on the opposite arm. And then the final one might be cradling your face in your hands. What I would like for you to do is to land in one of those forms and settle in for just a second. See what this feels like. I am going to offer you some wishes, that I would like you to either repeat silently to yourself, or just allow my voice to wash over you. May I be kind to myself. May I accept myself as I am. May I give myself the compassion that I need. May I know that I belong. May I connect with my basic goodness. May I know my own value. May I be strong. May I be safe. May I know that I am loved. In closing here allowing yourself one more round of breath, breathing in for 4, letting these wishes wash over you, and breathing out letting go of anything that no longer serves you.

MB: Thank you, Natalie. I know, I needed that today, and I have a feeling it resonated with a lot of other people. How would you recommend taking this practice and using it during a really busy day, when you've got maybe just a few minutes or even seconds between tasks?

ND: So, what I would say is first, go back to that compassionate touch. Find that touch that resonates with you. Even if we don't have that, just feeling your hands in your pocket, or just giving yourself kind of this gentle reminder that you're here, you're grounded with yourself. The other would be leaning on one of those wishes that might have resonated. So, let's go with the "I am safe". If we think about going from two really extreme cases that just happened, and you're being asked to go into another room that has a lot of unknowns, before we go into that room, finding a compassionate touch, just finding a place to ground, giving yourself a round or two of breath and saying to yourself, "I'm safe. I'm safe. I'm safe." What that does, is it changes this activation in your nervous system from screaming at you that you're unsafe. It changes it to being able to tell our nervous system, "I am safe. I'm uncomfortable." So, we're not unsafe. We are uncomfortable. So, you can say to yourself, "I am safe. I am uncomfortable. I am safe, but I am uncomfortable." The goal is to bring yourself just a minute of comfort, just a minute. Just give yourself a pause to give yourself comfort and that is one way of doing it.

MB: Very good. Thank you. This has been very helpful, and I think it is going to be relevant for hopefully everyone listening. If you are interested in learning more about the guided meditation, if you want to do that again on your own, we will make sure to include that in the show notes for anybody who wants that. If you are listening to this and you think your team would benefit from learning more about it, or if

you want to learn more about it yourself, you can reach out to the EAP office, either directly to Natalie, or to schedule with any of our counselors. Our phone number is (615) 936-1327.

Natalie, I want to thank you again for joining me, and thanks to everyone for listening. Until next time, take care.

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