

NEUROBIOLOGY OF PEACEFUL PARENTING:

Self-Compassion

(Audio Transcript)

Hello, I'm Dr. Laura Markham. Thank you for joining me for the **Neurobiology of Self-Compassion**.

Self-compassion isn't just some silly artificial thing about being nice to ourselves, that makes us uncomfortable. It's actually about re-parenting ourselves by showing up for ourselves. The most important relationship you will ever have is with yourself. So this is about showing up as the inner support that we all need, the wise, loving inner parent that some of us were able to internalize as children and some of us weren't, depending on the parenting we received.

So self-compassion supports us to be our best selves by nurturing our resilience, our wellbeing, and our ability to self-regulate. And as you can see, all of that creates a more nurturing environment for our children, as well as a more healing environment for us so we can grow and change.

Self-compassion is like a gentle hug for our own souls, about treating ourselves with the same kindness and gentleness and understanding we would treat a good friend or our own children. But let's talk about the science behind it!

Our brains are wired to respond to compassion, and that works whether that compassion is coming from outside us or from our more grounded, wisest self. The wise part of ourselves is, of course, harder to reach when we're very upset, but the more we practice, the easier it gets.

Self-compassion shifts our nervous system from sympathetic activation (fight or flight) or collapse, (parasympathetic dorsal vagal) which is when we give up, we shut down, we just can't cope. And every parent has felt that way sometimes, right?

Self-compassion shifts us from either fight or flight or shutting down/collapsing to the part of our parasympathetic nervous system that we call ventral vagal. And that part of us gives us inner resources. It connects with other people, and it helps us feel more resourced inside. We're more open, we're more relaxed. We're not in a state of threat. We're more open to learning and growing.

This activates the brain areas that are associated with self-soothing. It helps dampen the body's stress response or the fight-or-flight reaction. It calms the amygdala that's setting off all those alarm bells and interrupts the release of the stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline.

So remember, if you're upset and you're beating up on yourself, criticizing yourself, that's received as an attack. Even though it's not coming from outside, it's still an attack just like an outside criticism would be. And so when you're beating up on yourself, you're triggering stress hormones, you're activating your own pain centers. So that's why self-compassion is great to practice all the time, but especially it's important when you're upset.

Self-compassion stimulates the vagus nerve that helps us to calm down. It reduces the heart rate, it creates more calm. It allows us to be more emotionally regulated. Vagal tone means you can recover more quickly. Just like when you have muscle tone, vagal tone is a description of somebody who can recover from big emotions and physiological dysregulation more quickly.

And how can we create more vagal tone? We practice self-compassion!

Self-compassion also -- Remember, it's working just like compassion from outside you -- So it also stimulates the release of oxytocin, the love hormone, and that reduces the stress that your body's feeling. So it fosters the trust, emotional connection, and safety that we all need when we're feeling stressed.

Self-compassion even activates the brain regions in the prefrontal cortex that are associated with self-soothing and self-regulation. So that helps us be more effective in managing our emotions, and also helps us make better decisions even when something upsetting has happened.

This sounds like a lot going on in the brain just from self-compassion, doesn't it? It is. That's why I say that self-compassion is like a Jedi mind trick! It triggers a neurobiological response that calms the body and mind, so we're better equipped to handle strong emotions and stress.

And as we repeat the experience over time, remember, any repeated experience changes and shapes the brain -- so we're gradually rewiring our nervous systems for more calm and resilience.

Now, let's talk about practical ways to cultivate self-compassion in your life.

Kristin Neff, who popularized the term self-compassion, is a self-compassion researcher. She says there are three ingredients: mindfulness, kindness, and common humanity.

Mindfulness is noticing what you're feeling -- noticing that automatic impulse to judge yourself for what you're feeling or for what you just did, that mistake you just made -- and accepting it, but not jumping to action, not acting on it.

So just drop the fight. Stop fighting against whatever's happening. Stop fighting against the feeling. Stop fighting against what your kid just did. Accept it. Notice it, allow it, allow it in.

You're not stuffing your emotions when you're mindful, trying to calm yourself down. You're acknowledging, "*Wow, am I mad. Wow, am I scared. Wow, am I upset about this.*" You're acknowledging it. You're noticing it. You're not judging yourself for it. You're not fighting with anything. You're dropping the fight.

You're accepting it, but you're not acting. Because when we act, we're actually, that's coming from fight or flight, right? When we're acting, we're jumping in to stop something that's happening, or we're running away from it. We're trying to shut down those feelings.

So mindfulness is noticing it, accepting it, letting yourself feel it and not acting on it. That's the first thing you do for self-compassion. You just accept.

The second thing you do is **Kindness**. Kindness is when you replace that self-criticism and self-judgment with self-kindness. You remind yourself that you don't have to be perfect. It's okay to make mistakes. This thing is just a small part of who you are. You're still growing. Self-kindness, self-compassion is just being emotionally generous to yourself, the same way you would be to a good friend.

And the third part of self-compassion is **common humanity**. That's realizing that you're not alone. All humans struggle with mistakes, pain. We encounter difficulties in life. We have suffering, failure and challenges. It's part of the human condition. Every parent has felt what you're feeling right now. They've done what you did.

Many parents will say, "*But I don't want to let myself off the hook. I screamed at my children. I made them feel bad. I scared them.*" Got it. That's not the way you want to act. That's not your best self.

But when you give yourself compassion, you're not letting yourself off the hook. In fact, if you learn from this, then it's not a mistake. If you actually use this so that you forgive yourself and you change something, and you give yourself more support so that you don't do this again next time, well then it's not a mistake. It's a learning experience! And it's just changed your life and the life of your children.

So self-compassion is what allows you to accept what you did, take responsibility for it and give yourself the support you need to do something different next time. Because research shows that beating up on yourself doesn't change a thing. Feeling guilty doesn't change it.

You know what changes your behavior as a parent? Giving yourself the support you need! Just like your child's behavior doesn't change when you scream at them. It changes when you give them the support they need to meet your expectations.

So here's my challenge to you. When you next feel like you've made a mistake, or you're facing a really difficult situation and you're struggling, replace your self-criticism and your upset with self-compassion.

Notice what you're feeling. Accept it. Accept the situation. Drop the fight. Give yourself a hug. Research shows that giving yourself a hug calms your neurology. It actually makes you feel safer. Give yourself a hug and say to yourself, *"It's okay. Anyone would feel this way in this situation. I'm doing my best. It's going to be okay."*

So you talk yourself off the cliff by being soothing and reassuring, the same way you would do to your child or your friend. You deserve that compassion as well. And if you can give it to yourself, you will actually change your brain and nervous system so that you will come out of this experience better equipped to not have this experience next time.

As a parent, you have numerous opportunities to grow your nervous system by practicing self-compassion. When you live with children, there's childish behavior, and sometimes you'll get triggered. But every time you're able to respond to yourself with compassion, instead of beating up on yourself, you will become more able to self-regulate. You'll be increasing your vagal tone and your ability to recover faster.

You'll also be role-modeling for your children that it's okay to feel big emotions that can be managed with love and kindness and understanding. You'll be showing your children how to navigate life's ups and downs with grace and understanding and connection to other people.

Your children will be learning from watching you, how to be kinder and compassionate, both to themselves and others. They'll be growing a calmer, healthier brain and nervous system because of your role-modeling and your interaction with them.

So thank you for joining me on this exploration of the **Neurobiology of Self-Compassion** and this whole challenge about the **Neurobiology of Peaceful Parenting**. Remember, being kind to yourself, it's not just a personal choice. It's a powerful tool for creating a harmonious, loving family life.

Until I see you next, be compassionate to yourself. Your children will thank you for it!