

**Ep #382: Self-Compassion:
Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, somatics and nervous system nerd, and life coach B ea Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome, my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. So listen, over the past few weeks, we've been talking about the patterns that shape how we relate to ourselves and other people, the patterns we don't even realize we're in, but actually create so much of our experience of life.

What all of this work eventually comes back to is this: What happens when things feel hard, uncomfortable, vulnerable, emotionally exposed? How do you treat yourself when life gets lifey? How do you treat yourself when they disappoint you, when it doesn't work out, when things don't go the way that perfectionist story in your mind said that it should go?

How do you show up? How do you treat you? So many people think that self-compassion is about being nice to yourself, getting yourself flowers. And I love that. Please. I love to get a girl flowers. I love to get me flowers. I love to be nice to me. But where I'm going is, real self-compassion is what allows you to stay with yourself when things feel uncomfortable, without shutting down, without spiraling, without ruminating, without folding like an origami swan around those boundaries that you set, without going back to old habits.

So if you're ever feeling stuck in the same emotional loop, in my experience, leaning into more self-compassion is often where a big shift happens. So let's talk about it.

So today, we're turning our attention towards self-compassion. And we will be doing the following things. We will talk about what compassion is and define self-compassion. We'll talk about how your thoughts influence your notions of compassion and why it's important. And then I'll introduce the concept of dead-end thinking and U-turn thinking, an emotional U-turn. And

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

then, of course, we'll talk about how to build more self-compassion into your life. As always, my little nerdlets, let's define terms.

So, the dictionary defines compassion as sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others, as in, the victim should be treated with compassion. I don't really like that definition. Pity and concern, misfortune? I don't know about all that.

And it doesn't feel really loving or kind to me to pity someone and to assume that when something happens that you would experience as a misfortune is inherently a misfortune to another person. That feels paternalistic. Kind of yucky. And if you've been following my teachings around the think-feel-act cycle, it's missing the key step of understanding that something feels like a suffering or a misfortune based on your thoughts and your feelings around it.

Instead, I like the definition from the amazing Buddhist psychologist and teacher, Dr. Tara Brach, who writes, "In Buddhist teachings, compassion is described as a quivering of the heart in response to suffering. Compassion awakens as we allow ourselves to be touched by our shared vulnerability, our own or that of another. It's the medicine we most need to bring healing to our world."

Gosh, I just love that. A quivering of the heart. You know how I feel about feeling our feels and feeling our bodily somatic sensations. It's everything. How beautiful.

And yes, allowing, therefore there's a choice, right? Allowing ourselves to be touched, to be awake and awoken to the felt sensation of pain, struggle, suffering. That sounds like a framework for profound healing to me, especially when we can feel and apply that knowledge of quivering, that sensation of quivering in our hearts to ourselves and to begin to come to our own suffering, our own experience of the world with that gentle, loving heart from which we can do thoughtful thought work.

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

Within the cognitive behavioral framework of my coaching, which is, of course, under the umbrella of a larger equality, equity, liberation, and freedom-based feminist framework, I think it's important to both feel that heart quivering, to experience it, to honor it, and to be careful and thoughtful about our relationship to our own stories. That is, we all have beliefs. Beliefs are stories, thoughts that you have thought over and over again until your nervous system, your smarty-pants little brain, codes those stories as facts, as true.

For example, I used to think I was fat because I was told it, and that was very bad, and I was a disappointment to my family. I believed that because of the pressures of my family of origin, in my Argentine culture of origin, in this American culture. And to be a size that was different from my own size as a kid and young adult, that was the dream. That's the thing I was missing if I was to be lovable. I thought I needed to change my body, and frankly, to change all sorts of things about myself to be lovable.

Learning to see those stories and to change them, to release my attachment and grasping of them, is a cornerstone of what we talked about last week, positive self-regard. And the truth is that these stories are so challenging to shift if, one, you can't see the stories, the cassette tapes playing on repeat in your brain. If two, you believe these stories, these thoughts, to be fact, real, unchangeable, immutable. Three, you don't have compassion for that part of yourself that believes these stories.

It was painful to see what I was believing about me, super painful. And the more I leaned into that pain and learned to accept it and to bring tons of compassion to and for myself, the easier it was to put the stories down and to learn to write my own story, to install a new belief for and about myself.

An important point here is the difference between empathy and compassion, which has to do with beliefs and believing our habitual thought stories. For example, you hear yourself saying, "I'm having a terrible day."

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

Empathy says, "Oh, I hear that you're having a terrible day. I'm so sorry about that."

Empathy feels along with the story. That is, empathy believes the story that the day is terrible. Compassion is about showing up for the feeling and not necessarily believing the story, understanding, like we do in this family, that we all have these automatic stories. And so often, those are just thoughts, not facts.

I recently talked about looking at my week and saying it was a hot mess. And that's not real. I was wrong there, and that's okay. And what I needed for myself in that moment was compassionate love for the part of me that was believing it, without believing that story. If I believe the story that my week was a hot mess, and if you believe your own story that your day is terrible, you're so overwhelmed, there's not much work to be done. There's nowhere really to go, and you stay spinning in that same old thought. When you label a thought or a story as a fact versus lovingly, gently calling yourself in about it.

For example, I said to myself, "Sweet brain, it's not a fact that my day is terrible." And I actually do talk to my own self and my own brain in this prosodic tone. It's calming to the nervous system. "My day has been what it has been, and I get to choose my outlook on it with lots of love for myself. Today was challenging so far, and luckily, I know I can do hard things. And I can take five minutes to take a break, to breathe, to move, to eat, to drink water, to reset. And then I can go back into my workday with new energy and a new story. I will do my best today because that's all I can ever do, and that's amazing."

See the difference there? It's about not believing that story. "It's a hot mess. It's terrible. I'm overwhelmed. All is lost. I'm doomed," while loving the part of yourself that really believes that and giving it tenderness.

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

And while, yes, our focus here is on compassionately recognizing and then working to change your thoughts to change your feelings, as feminists, we are always mindful of social context. I talk a lot about the power of changing your thoughts, and this is a perfect time to pause to say that the work I teach and what I do with my life coaching clients is about so much more than jumping to that.

And if you've been listening to the show, you know that I'm never out here with that "positive vibes only" BS, because what even is that? Frankly, it smells like emotional and spiritual bypassing to me. And to tell someone who's experienced trauma, which frankly is pretty much all of us on this planet right now under late-stage capitalism, my love, to tell someone to just think positive thoughts is harmful, hurtful, and ignores the reality of how the human nervous system works. It ignores both the science and the sacred understanding of human life and life force energy.

Trauma and stress impact our nervous systems, change our physiology, and while, yes, repeating the same old harmful thoughts on loop does keep you in that same thought-feeling-action cycle, just jumping to attempting to think a new thought without feeling the feelings the old thought created is not healing. It's hiding. It's buffering with fake positivity.

If someone you love dies, if you experience violence, loss, whatever it may be, I want to encourage you to feel all the sadness, all the grief, all the anger. Feel it, my love. Feel it in your body. Really experience it versus just hiding out in your brain and thinking, "I'm sad, I'm angry," or what have you, and then jumping to positive vibes only.

Whatever you are feeling, I want to encourage you to not shoot that second arrow, which I talk about in Episode 15 if you don't know what that means. Don't shoot that second arrow into your tender heart. Instead, acknowledge your feelings and thank your body for having them. All feelings are teachers. No feelings are bad per se, though many can be so uncomfortable. And as always, that's okay. I know you can hold space in

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

your own heart for that discomfort. You can learn to live with its presence until you're ready to process it through your body.

This step is vital and must not be skipped. You can't just think your way out of it or will your way out of it. You get to practice feeling, which I know can be scary and new and can lead you to have lots of thoughts and feelings about having feelings. The thing is, my love, there are no skipping steps when it comes to healing.

Our childhood wounds stay with us and can drive our think-feel-act cycle and can actually keep us from doing the vital work of feeling challenging emotions. Some from childhood may be anger or disappointment or sadness at our caregivers. Other challenging emotions may be grief over institutionalized racism, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, on and on. Until we learn to stand next to our hurt, to look it in the eye and acknowledge it.

As an immigrant with chronic pain and chronic illness and lots of ancestral healing to do, it wasn't until I learned how to hold space for the complexity of my feelings, my own and my inherited trauma, that I was able to begin to slowly start choosing new thoughts for myself in order to create new feelings in my body. And that process has to do with attending and befriending your nervous system, your inner children, your stories about your worth and value.

And this is where self-compassion and self-love come in. And we do this not to pull the proverbial wool of "positive vibes only" over our own eyes, but rather to begin to experience in your body, mind, and spirit what it means and looks like to take care of yourself in a new way, to reparent yourself on the daily.

This isn't some simple one-and-done thing. I'm never out here saying, "Just pick a new feeling, pick a new thought. That's all you'll ever do." And it does start with one step: self-compassion. Because you can't heal hurt with more

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

hurt. And if you're being mean to you about being mean to you, where's that going to get you, my darling?

So, when we're talking about self-love, about healing, about positive self-regard, about learning to live an intentional life, self-compassion is the key to accepting that you're human and that you F up and that can be okay. Again, accepting your humanness when her inner child has her eyes set on perfectionism as a protection against feeling bad about yourself. And your inner child may encourage you to beat yourself up.

Self-compassion is the process and practice of accepting your fallible humanity and not being terrible to yourself about it. And it's key to learning how to really, really love yourself. And when we're learning, we mess up. You're going to hurt your own feelings. You're going to hurt someone else's feelings. It's like failure in the good way. And it's okay to fail at doing human things like communicating without resentment or codependence when you have systems in place to address the things that aren't working and to do so without adding more hurt. Because adding more hurt to your nervous system is really easy to do.

When your focus is on the story that you're terrible, that you're a certain way—and I hear this a lot, "I'm just an angry person. I'm not a forgiving person," and I talked about this in Episode 18. These kinds of thoughts, "I'm terrible. I always mess everything up. I'm this terrible kind of person," that's what I call a dead-end thought. Because there's nowhere to go from there. You're taking a thought and you're calling it a circumstance, a fact, a thing that is, when it's not. It's just an opinion about you, about the world, that got into your head somehow and feels like something you believe.

Dead-end thinking stops all possible work to make your life better because, well, if you're horrible, if you're some kind of bad person, that's a fact, so what are you going to do but throw up your hands and give up, right? Well, I propose a different plan altogether, which is the emotional U-turn plan, my antidote to dead-end thinking.

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

The emotional U-turn is when you notice yourself doing, saying, thinking, feeling something you don't want to, like being mean to yourself, snapping at one of your romantic partners, a kid, or a co-worker, spinning in mind drama like stories of overwhelm, stress, busyness, confusion, labeling yourself in a way that blocks growth. So, instead of staying there, you throw a rope down the proverbial well so you can begin to hoist yourself out of it. Wait to mix the metaphors, Vic. That was good.

So the starting point of the emotional U-turn will look different for each of us and depends on the situation and how much your nervous system has identified with your story. Step one, and you may be shocked to hear this, dear listener, but the first step in bringing more self-compassion in is seeing where self-compassion isn't. That is, learning to be your own watcher, sitting in awareness and meditation. These tools help you to see where you're rejecting yourself, where you're telling those negative stories and letting your internal critic run wild. There's no need for that, my love. It simply doesn't serve you. So you get to notice it in order to begin to befriend the part of you that wants to say those things to you.

As a trauma-informed, nervous system-obsessed life coach, nurse practitioner, breath worker, I'm here to say, mindfulness can be so scary and activating to a nervous system with heightened trauma responses. So if you're raising your little paw over there saying, "That's me," I want to tell you, my love, that's completely normal, expectable, and totally okay.

I'm going to be doing a show in a few weeks about something called resourcing, which is a vital part of making mindfulness and other practices more accessible for folks. But for now, I want to say, sitting still, being in your body, relaxing, receiving, versus constantly giving, giving, giving, not buffering against your feelings, getting in touch with yourself—all of these things can feel really challenging at first, my love. And that's okay. It's okay because there's no timeline but your own, and I know you can attend to yourself along the way.

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

If you find yourself going into fight or flight or into dorsal vagal shutdown, also known as freeze, detailed in Episode 48, then the first step is grounding, orienting, and stabilizing yourself first and foremost. I always start that practice with a deep breath into my belly. That helps us to get back into the ventral vagal, into our parasympathetic, calm space, our safe and secure space. So together, my love, deep breath in, and out. Try to really expand your belly when you do it. In, and out.

And if I'm finding myself getting a little activated in my nervous system, I'll put a hand on my belly and breathe with the goal of moving it up and back. That really helps.

Some resources that I've created just for you because I love you are simple exercises you can do at home or on the go to calm or begin to regulate your nervous system if you go into either sympathetic overdrive or dorsal vagal collapse. So, as presents, there are some beautiful exercises around orienting, grounding, and completing the stress activation cycle that I made for you, and they will be listed in the show notes so you can click and download those, have them on your phone or your computer so you can access them anytime you want to feel grounded, centered, and remembering that you're safe. Everything's okay.

Step two: Ask yourself what's up. This is the "wonder" or "curiously question your inner intentions" step. That is, you may ask yourself where you've heard this negative story about you or the world before. Is it an old cassette tape or a newer feeling, worry, fear, meanness? Just get curious with it. "Is this thought real?" you may ask yourself. "Or is it a dead-end thought?" I always ask myself what my brain is trying to do here. Is it trying to keep me from failing? Is it trying to keep me playing small and thus falsely protected? Is it trying to keep me from shining in a way that feels new or scary? Just get curious, lovingly curious. And do make sure to write it out. Thoughts spinning in your head are really hard to sort out. Thoughts on paper are much easier to see.

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

And this is also where coaching comes in. It's my passion to help folks just like you to see their own brains in action and to then support them in making new choices about new thoughts and new nervous system supports to bring in. This is what I mean when I say, "Manage your mind." Get curious so you can enter into the thought work protocol we do together, bringing your awareness to your thoughts and the feelings they create, getting really curious about why you're thinking the same thought on repeat, and asking yourself, "Do I want to keep thinking this? Does it serve me?"

Let that be your guiding question, my angel. Does this current thought and feeling serve me? Is this a dead-end thought? Would an emotional U-turn serve me better here?

Step three in the process is to befriend. The next step is to give yourself some love. Start by really understanding that the stories you've told yourself and the feelings that come with those stories served a purpose and served you well. They were how you survived and navigated a world that was probably confusing at times. You can love your brain for protecting you in those ways with a new understanding that those stories, which were so useful then, aren't true and may not serve you now. This is the issue of adaptive and maladaptive habits and is detailed in Episode 19.

My favorite part of befriending is to communicate with the sensations you are sensing in your body. Sometimes they're shy and don't want to come into the field of awareness, and inviting them in gently can allow them to consider coming to the light. Like with a wild creature in the woods on the edge of a field. Approach your feelings with as much tenderness as you can muster. If you have trouble, if it feels challenging to extend that kind of compassion towards yourself, imagine that you are helping a beloved friend, a scared child, a tender wild animal. What words and energy would you offer? What would you do to show them love, comfort? Would a warm bath or supportive, healthy meal or snuggling into your favorite blanky

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

help? Would a gentle walk outside or talking to a trusted friend provide comfort?

The form the befriending takes doesn't really matter. The important thing is to pause often, to give your most tender parts so much love. These thoughts, these now maladaptive thoughts that don't serve you anymore, are not your enemy. In fact, they were once your very best friends.

Step four is to shift. Finally, when you've identified the thought that doesn't serve you and the feeling it creates, once you've calmed your nervous system around it and grounded yourself in your body and befriended the part of you that wants you to think this thought, then, then you can choose a new thought with the goal of creating a new feeling and taking a new action to create a new result in your life. Don't try to skip steps. Don't try to jump to the new thought. It just doesn't work if your nervous system and your body aren't along for the ride, my beauty.

All right, my angels, please download the free audio exercises. They are so helpful for all of us. Get out that pen and paper, write it out, feel into that self-loving compassion. I talk right to mine. I say, "Thank you, protector. I know you're making me upset and irritable in this moment because you think this is a challenge. And that's okay. Thank you. I love you." And then I give that part a new job. I like to tell my mind all is well, and the protector can go play, that maybe it can go attend to my inner child, and I'll let it know when I need protection. Being your own best friend means befriending all of your perfect self.

All right, my angel, practice this. Pause often to check in and do everything you can to show yourself love in every situation. Why not be kind and compassionate with you, my darling one? Having lived both ways, attempting to push myself to change by being my own worst critic for 25, 30 years, and having brought in tons of self-compassion and love in the last decade, I'm here to testify to just how much a gal can get done and just how much change and growth and success is possible when you are kind

Ep #382: Self-Compassion: Radical Kindness for Your Nervous System

and loving and compassionate with yourself. When you don't believe the stories your brain is telling, but rather you honor those old patterns, your old protectors, befriend them, and choose a different, kinder path.

My darling, you've probably started to notice that this work isn't about fixing yourself. It's about changing how you relate to yourself in real time. And that's the kind of shift that doesn't just change one area of your life. In my experience, it changes, I mean, it feels dramatic to say it, but it does lead to changes everywhere. It changes everything.

So, I want to invite you to listen in once more to the episodes that have really resonated for you and really see where you can begin to apply the tools from these lessons to your actual, real life. So the conversations, the lessons, the episodes that really spark something within you, that's often a hint to where your next layer of work is. So I want to invite you to go take another listen and bring your friends into the conversation. Right? Share these episodes with the people you love. Share the podcast. Share it on your social.

Start talking about what this work means to your life, what you're learning, and how you're growing. It's how we go from, "I learned a thing," to "I'm doing life differently." Thanks for joining me. I'm so glad you're here. Let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe. You are held. You are loved. And when one of us heals, we help to heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao, ciao.