

## The Best Thing Today podcast: Fierce Self-Compassion

Intro [00:00:01]: Aalto University podcast.

Merita Petäjä [00:00:11]: I met one colleague of mine. She's also a psychologist but in another organization. She really looked like a baby. I asked her: what has happened to you? She was so open and so soft, like a little baby is. She said: I have just been in a one week self-compassion training. I immediately thought that I want to go as well. It was so evident how big of an impression this training had on her.

Insert [00:00:46]: The Best Thing Today. A podcast series by Aalto University psychologists. Today, Paula Sjöblom and Merita Petäjä.

Paula Sjöblom [00:00:56]: Fierce self-compassion. That's our topic for today. My name is Paula Sjöblom, and this is The Best Thing Today. I'm happy to have Merita Petäjä here with me today. Merita, would you like to introduce yourself? Who are you?

Merita Petäjä [00:01:18]: Hi Paula. I'm really happy to be here today. About my education, I'm a psychologist. I have devoted my life to enhance wellbeing in several different ways working with individuals but also with communities, in a role of a consultant.

Paula Sjöblom [00:01:39]: Today we are going to talk about fierce self-compassion. It would be very nice to hear a little bit about self-compassion. Would you tell me a bit more about it?

Merita Petäjä [00:01:52]: Self-compassion is something that you might recognize when you think of a situation in which your friend is facing troubles, is in a desperate or a difficult situation. When that friend is someone that you deeply care about, what would you feel towards this person, this dear friend in this situation? That probably is compassion. If we direct it towards ourselves, self-compassion would be a similar loving feeling towards ourselves in a situation of difficulties where we have been confronted, or we have made a bad mistake, and we are really ashamed of ourselves or anything else. Those daily situations when we sometimes feel just a little bit bad or sometimes really desperate.

Paula Sjöblom [00:02:48]: Is this same thing as tender self-compassion?

Merita Petäjä [00:02:52]: Yes. Yes. This could be tender self-compassion. Self-compassion has two different aspects. The tender compassion is more of a nurturing way of helping in those moments. Giving understanding, giving time, validating feelings. Yes, this feels terrible. I feel ashamed. I feel disappointed, or something like that. Stopping there and validating the feeling. Sometimes we need to give some care towards ourselves or to other people in those moments so that we are able to overcome the difficult feelings there. Tenderness is one aspect. The other aspect is fierce self-compassion. Maybe you can get an idea of the fierce self-compassion if you think of someone rather helpless. If you have a child, you can think of your child, or your pet or your sister's children or someone you love. This person is being threatened, and you get this mama bear energy to save this other person. It's about taking action, it's about being brave. We need both of these aspects. Of course, if we have been treated badly, first we need to go on, accept the experience, go through the difficult emotions, and then find ways of taking action to protect our borders or help ourselves or point out the injustice. Sometimes we need to take action on the behalf of other people.

Paula Sjöblom [00:04:46]: This sounds very interesting and very important when I think about modern life and how demanding it is. At the same time, I feel that it's not very easy task for us. I would like to hear a little bit about what this means to you. How do you use self-compassion in your own life?

Merita Petäjä [00:05:10]: How would I use it in my own life nowadays?

Paula Sjöblom [00:05:13]: Yes.

Merita Petäjä [00:05:14]: As a part of my learning path, I must say that it's been a long path but I'm starting where I am now. That means I use different techniques to recognize difficult feelings. It hasn't been easy. I wasn't taught to do that. I think many of us have the experience that when we were children and we had negative feelings, we were advised to repress them. Okay, now we just got to go to the daycare so you can't cry anymore, you know. Get this candy and let's get over with it. We repress the negative feelings. So it's been a long path to stop and then try to catch the bodily sensation of the negative feeling. How it relates to my every day is that I need to take time. Every day there's a moment, even today in the morning there was a moment when I was really confused and I couldn't understand what it is. I had to say stop to myself and take a couple of moments to try to understand, catch the feeling in my body and breathe out, and then find forms of action I need to do.

Insert [00:06:27]: The Best Thing Today.

Paula Sjöblom [00:06:30]: I can believe that it has been a process. If you look back, do you remember the first time in your life when self-compassion would have been really needed?

Merita Petäjä [00:06:43]: It was maybe eight years ago. On a street in Helsinki I met one colleague of mine. She's also a psychologist but in another organization. She really looked like a baby. I asked her: what has happened to you? She was so open and so soft, like a little baby is. She said: I have just been in a one week self-compassion training. I immediately thought that I want to go as well. It was so evident how big impression this training had on her. Couple of years later, I had a chance to go to Iceland and participate in a training where there were psychotherapists from around the world. [Richard] Christopher Germer from Harvard University was training us with another person. You can say that these are life-changing courses, and that was one. After the course, I started to be able to look at my life backwards. I realized the points that were related to this experience, but I wasn't able to name them so clearly beforehand.

Paula Sjöblom [00:07:58]: Maybe, if you don't have an urge for the self-compassion, it's very difficult to even notice that it's something that is there and something that might do good for us.

Merita Petäjä [00:08:13]: Yes. I also think that it's important to see the path of self-compassion or fierce self-compassion as a long thread in life. There's no quick fix. It's like a path, and it is also important to be very self-compassionate on that path. You can't perform it. It's important to take the steps that are just the right size at that moment. When we start to recognize the repressed negative feelings, it can give a backlash. It means that the repressed negative feelings are getting air and they become quite big. So it backfires and there's too much to handle at once. It's not something that now I read a book or take one course and I grab the whole thing. I think it's important to take one thought here and another thought there, work on that and live with it, and be on the learning path.

Paula Sjöblom [00:09:26]: Merita, you and I, we are both working in Aalto University. What has self-compassion got to do with universities?

Merita Petäjä [00:09:36]: As we know, at the university we have a lot of very talented people. Also we have a high need to perform well. It is very performance-oriented

surrounding. High skills of self-management are required here. We also are pretty alone. We work in teams, but we perform pretty much independently. Of course there is competition. There's competition between colleagues, competition over money, competition over jobs or over grades. Performance-orientation sometimes force us to think that we perform better when we are very harsh to ourselves. That leads to a different path. The other path is a path of performing, and the other part, in my understanding, is a path of learning. I'm able to learn from my failures and really stop and see why did I mess up. Oh my goodness, I forgot to do this and that, and I didn't concentrate on that, and this is why my performance wasn't good. I made a mess in the meeting. I was blaming someone or there was something I didn't do, and now I'm so ashamed. If I'm able to bare my negative feelings, my own disappoint about myself and feelings of shame, I have an opportunity to redirect my own behavior. This way, I actually might do better next time. The act of dealing with these difficult feelings is tender self-compassion. Fierce compassion is when I make changes. Sometimes I need fierceness to say I'm sorry. Sometimes I need fierceness to say no, I can't do this. Making borders. Sometimes I need fierceness to stick to my schedule. We know from AllWell? study wellbeing questionnaire that high burnout rate is correlated with high self-criticism. We tend to think that if we are critical towards ourselves, we perform better. That might not be true because high self-criticism can cause us to not be able to look at our failures. We just try to repress them. If we are able to stop when we fail and look what happened and go deeply into those feelings of being disappointed and ashamed, then we might be more able to redirect our behavior. From AllWell? study wellbeing questionnaire we also know that self-compassion is correlated with self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the feeling of being able to trust ourselves. Yes, I can do this. I can do this now, I can do this year later. Of course there are links that need to be more researched, but these are signs that we could take it seriously. It's not a soft skill, in my view.

Insert [00:12:55]: The Best Thing Today. Paula Sjöblom and Merita Petäjä.

Paula Sjöblom [00:13:00]: If I think of myself or the students I work with, how do we know when we need to be tender towards ourselves or more fierce?

Merita Petäjä [00:13:13]: Tenderness is related to the feelings at that moment so that we are able to deal with the feelings and give the tenderness to our own needs, understand the needs. Sometimes our need is to take action. For example, if my schedule is already full and someone that I care for asks me to do something. I panic, I can't do it. I should. I'm a bad person if I don't help. I'm insufficient, insufficient mother or insufficient colleague. What do I do? I feel terrible, I can't help. Then comes the fierce part. I need to take action. I need to draw boundaries to protect myself. I really appreciate you as my colleague, Paula, but sorry, I can't do it now.

Paula Sjöblom [00:14:10]: Yes, setting limits.

Merita Petäjä [00:14:12]: Setting boundaries, protecting. Sometimes we need to use the fierceness to provide something to someone. We need to take action to make space, for example, rise up and say what we think. Sometimes we need to fight for injustice, for ourselves or for someone else. First we need to take care of those feelings.

Insert [00:14:37]: The Best Thing Today. A podcast series by Aalto University psychologists.

Paula Sjöblom [00:14:44]: Next we could talk a bit about radical wellbeing. It's something that interests me and something that I hear more and more talked about. What is radical wellbeing?

Merita Petäjä [00:14:58]: Could I look at how fierce compassion is linked with radical wellbeing?

Paula Sjöblom [00:15:04]: I think that might be a good idea.

Merita Petäjä [00:15:07]: Radical wellbeing has a component of radical self-care. Self-care means that we take time to take care of our own indivisible self. That indivisible self has different aspects. It means that I have my values, I have my cultural background, I have my sexual identity. I have several different identities. I have my social circles, people I care for. I have my own coping strategies - what I do when I'm facing difficulties. I have my sources of creativity. I also have my ways of taking care of my physical wellbeing. This big circle of all these things is something I need to take care of. Sometimes it means that I need to fight for it, to make those borders, set limits, because I need time. Personally, for example, I need time to go to my Finn cottage to cope with difficult things. I use writing, I use artistic methods, sometimes I use gardening when I'm processing things which I have to digest and I have to find answers to. I kind of save them to those weekends when I can go there. Radical self-care means that I take care of my indivisible self. Sometimes I need to use fierce self-compassion. I need to defend myself, protect myself. I need to protect the time of recovery so that I don't burn out. We all need to do it. I need to protect the time that I have scheduled for sports. So easily it gets eaten up by some other duties. And that's fierceness. That's fierceness. It means taking action. Radical wellbeing and radical self-care also can mean that we see our privileged position. Sometimes we need to take action for other people. There are many important things. There are elements of identity, elements of values, and elements of self-care, which is maybe more familiar for the most of us, for

example exercise and taking care of the physical wellbeing. Many things. And this model I was referring to is research-based.

Insert [00:17:49]: The Best Thing Today. Paula Sjöblom and Merita Petäjä.

Paula Sjöblom [00:17:59]: How can I practice self-compassion?

Merita Petäjä [00:18:03]: Towards yourself or compassion towards others?

Paula Sjöblom [00:18:09]: For myself.

Merita Petäjä [00:18:10]: Yourself. Okay. If you have a difficult feeling, if you can think of a situation in which you have a difficult feeling. You are disappointed with yourself, for example. Then you can innerly say to yourself, hey, I'm so sorry. I'm here for you. And if you have a tender name - do you have any nickname that was used about you when you were a child?

Paula Sjöblom [00:18:37]: Actually, no.

Merita Petäjä [00:18:39]: Okay. It was Paula.

Paula Sjöblom [00:18:40]: Yea, Paula.

Merita Petäjä [00:18:42]: So talking to the little Paula within you. Hey Paula, I'm so sorry for you. I'm here for you. What would you need right now? These are the actual words I'm using with myself. Merita, Meri, what would you need now? I'm sorry. It's okay to feel this way. We all have similar experiences. This is common humanity, a shared experience.

Paula Sjöblom [00:19:10]: I think that's a good question. What do I need right now? That's something I try to remember, and I think that for all our students this might be good to remember.

Merita Petäjä [00:19:22]: Yes. Of course, it's not so easy to have this kind of a tender reaction towards ourselves because many times we are naturally angry. Oh Merita, you are such a fool! Why did you do this? I think the first step is just to pay attention: what are the first spontaneous words towards yourself? Don't demand that you need to be self-compassionate right away. At least for me, it needed a lot of practice. I'm still practicing. Those negative words come automatically, as a reaction. The magic is to take some time before doing anything, this magical pause for just reflection. What are the first words? Okay, if they were very angry and critical, is there something that is a bit softer and understanding?

Paula Sjöblom [00:20:23]: I think for most of the people it's easier to be critical towards themselves than kind and understanding.

Merita Petäjä [00:20:30]: Yes. I really agree. At least that has been my path. I have been very performance-oriented and very critical. That's the automatic reaction. It's a learning path. When we come to the fierce self-compassion, when we start to take action when we see injustice, I'd like to comment that it has the same elements of kindness and common humanity as the tender self-compassion. It doesn't mean hostility. If we see injustice, fierce self-compassion is not a hostile reaction but more like a calm reaction. We manage the feelings and then we can sit strongly where we are with the attitude of I can see what happens. And then challenge, can you? Stay in the facts. Maybe sometimes it is necessary to say out loud those facts but with this calm inner attitude that's true for your self-compassion.

[music 00:21:40]

Merita Petäjä [00:21:44]: May I share a few sentences? They were written by Eva Sivan, who works at this center of self-compassion. She has formulated these sentences from the well-known metta meditation. Mindfulness is one way of stopping at a difficult feelings and then trying to formulate new thoughts. Eva Sivan has written: May I be strong in the face of hate. May I seek justice with mercy and equity. May I be a resource of compassion, kindness and hope.

Paula Sjöblom [00:22:34]: Thank you for these words.

Insert [00:22:37]: Aalto University podcast.