

*Self-compassion is key because when we're able to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of shame, we're more likely to reach out, connect, and experience empathy.*

—BRENÉ BROWN

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## *Disdain From My Research Supervisor*



After completing a doctoral program, I accepted a postdoctoral fellowship at Case Western Reserve University. By then, I had a certain lighthearted attitude toward life and research. I was to work on a research hypothesis that I had designed as a graduate student. I was very excited about the project. With good fortune, I was in a position to collaborate with a man who was both a skilled biochemist and an excellent researcher, and whose guidance I very much wanted.

Yet in one of our early conversations, he was so frustrated with me that he said: “Are you sure you have a PhD, Hema? You don’t seem to be bright.”

I felt sad and scared because I had been considered a good scientist and a productive researcher. My identity was suddenly in jeopardy. I felt like a failure since he was a renowned scientist; his words were the truth to me. It was a very painful experience.

After spending three hours crying and breathing, I returned to his office renewed with compassion. “Can I spend a few moments in your luminous presence so that I can brighten myself?” I asked.

## *The Healing Power of Empathy*

By then, I think he was aware of his behavior, and he was very kind to me thereafter.

Particularly rewarding to me at that time was that I remembered to breathe. I understood that the best antidote to any violence was breathing. This has been one of the most exciting and major turning points in my development. By the end of the fellowship, we had published three papers together. My continued association with him has meant a great deal to me. After that day, my PhD stood for “psychologically healthy and delightful.”

The time I spent breathing and crying was the time I allowed myself to stop and benefit from experiencing and reacting with freshness, taking time to remove any prejudice and restriction. This, to me, was meditation in its own form.

In those three hours of breathing, I became aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and inability to listen to others. I affirmed my own convictions to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to my fellow beings and relieve them of their suffering whenever possible. After understanding that words can create happiness or suffering, I am now more conscious to learn ways to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope.

—HEMA POKHARNA, [www.journeysoflife.org](http://www.journeysoflife.org)