

Toxic Positivity

What's in it for me? Discover the problem with positive thinking.

“Think positive!” If only it were that simple. If only positive thinking could banish all negative emotions and lead to a life of guaranteed success and happiness. In the US, that's the lie that many people have come to believe. And, ironically, the constant pressure to be positive is actually making us feel even worse. These blinks reveal the truth about toxic positivity – and offer an antidote. They present practical ways for people to support each other and live more fulfilling lives, free from the toxic influence of inauthentic positivity. In these blinks, you'll learn

the surprising roots of the positive thinking movement in the US; the connection between toxic positivity and societal inequality; and what to say to someone who's struggling.

Even with the best of intentions, positivity can become toxic.

Imagine this. You've just found out that you've lost your job. You're upset – freaking out, even – and have no idea what to do next. Maybe a chat with a friend will make you feel better. You want support and validation for the way you're feeling. Your friend will know just what to say. So you tell them – “I've lost my job.” And what does your friend say? “Well, it could be worse. And at least you'll have lots of spare time now. Think of it as a learning experience!” Do you feel better now? Didn't think so. Your friend's response is a classic example of toxic positivity. Unfortunately, these conversations happen all the time. You share your problem, and someone tells you to look on the bright side. They mean well – they really do. But their reaction probably leaves you feeling misunderstood and distant from the other person. You might even feel worse than before. Toxic positivity tends to have this kind of effect. After all, it's called “toxic” for a reason. The author, Whitney Goodman, is a licensed marriage and family therapist on a crusade against toxic positivity. In her mid-twenties, she realized she was exhausted from pretending to be happy all the time. And as a therapist, she soon discovered that telling her clients to focus on positive thinking and emotions was totally ineffective. What's going on, she wondered? Why can't we just be honest about how we're feeling? And what if certain kinds of positivity are actually harmful? By the way, Goodman is not the first person to challenge the idea that all positivity is, well, positive. Academics and researchers like bell hooks and Barbara Ehrenreich have already criticized the pursuit of happiness and positivity. They've pointed out just how damaging these attitudes can be, both for individuals and marginalized communities. In fact, criticism of toxic positivity dates right back to the beginning of the problem. The American psychologist William James was sounding alarm bells way back in the nineteenth century. So, toxic positivity and its critics are nothing new. It's time we took the problem seriously. We need to acknowledge that the insistence on being positive can be harmful in a myriad of ways – particularly for vulnerable people. In other words, it's time to stop telling people to “look on the bright side.” Maybe there is no bright side! Or maybe the person suffering from a chronic illness isn't in the mood for chirpy clichés.

When someone is struggling, the last thing they need is pressure to “be positive.”

The very notion that positivity can be toxic makes people uncomfortable. Whenever Goodman makes online posts that criticize the “good vibes only” culture, her inbox is filled with incredulous – and sometimes angry – messages. How on earth could positivity be toxic? Maybe you’re thinking the same thing . . . which is totally normal, by the way. Before we go any further, let’s get a couple of things straight. Of course positivity can be helpful. And of course it’s not inherently toxic. Goodman’s point is that it can become toxic, even when someone has the best intentions. When your friend reacted to the news of your job loss by saying, “It could be worse,” obviously they were trying to be helpful. It was a conventional, well-intended response. And intent is important, of course. No one would argue with that! But while intent matters, impact matters even more. This is especially true when people are dealing with serious, life-changing problems. Heartbreak, illness, death . . . How should we react when someone we know is going through a really difficult time? Well, here’s what not to say: “Try to be grateful for what you have.” Or, “Everything happens for a reason.” These are the kinds of expressions that we often use in an attempt to be encouraging and comforting. They’re the expressions that the Fernandez family often heard from people they knew, in the aftermath of a terrible tragedy they went through. The Fernandez family were clients of Goodman. One day, they came to her for an emergency therapy session. Their 23-year-old son had just died in a boating accident. Everyone in the family was in shock; there was so much pain. They told Goodman that they’d gone to the local temple where they sometimes worshiped, looking for support. At the temple, members of the congregation tried their best to be supportive. They told the Fernandez family that their son’s death was “part of God’s plan.” Their son was “in a better place.” “Everything happens for a reason.” These words were well-intentioned, but far from helpful. Instead, everyone in the family was left feeling confused, like they were somehow doing grief wrong. But then, just think about it for a moment. When someone’s child suddenly dies, how can they possibly be expected to put a positive spin on the situation? Of course, a tragic, premature death of a loved one is one of the hardest situations that anyone can face. It should be obvious that platitudes feel inadequate, and that there’s no place for forced positivity. This kind of positivity is just as unhelpful and ineffective in other situations: a woman struggling with infertility, a man dealing with chronic illness, someone coming to terms with their divorce. Please don’t tell any of these people that “Everything happens for a reason.” It’s not going to make them feel any better! You’re probably wondering what the right response is. And it’s true – it’s really hard to know what to say sometimes. There’s no perfect script, but Goodman has a few suggestions. When someone tells you about their problem, listen – really listen. Acknowledge their pain. You can say, “That is so hard,” or “I’m sorry you’re going through this.” You might also want to offer practical support, and check in on them regularly. Basically, just be there for them. You can even say, “I don’t know what to say, but I’m here for you.” That’s what the Fernandez family wanted to hear – something more authentic and helpful than empty positivity.

Toxic positivity is deeply ingrained in

US society.

OK, so now we're getting a better understanding of what toxic positivity means, and how to avoid it. But where does it come from? Why do we instinctively tell each other – and ourselves – to “think positive?” In the US, being pro-positivity feels natural because it's such an integral part of the culture. People have to love their jobs, love their lives, and be grateful for everything. The media celebrates people who have made the best of a difficult situation, like the guy who keeps smiling despite his illness or disability. Struggles are “opportunities,” right? It's hard to think otherwise because people are taught to think like this from an early age. A really early age. There are positive babies – and negative babies. You'll hear adults say, “Such a happy baby!” or “They never stopped crying.” So right from the beginning, the pressure to be positive is relentless. Children are told not to complain, or not to be a “negative Nancy.” School is “fun,” a place where everyone should “be happy.” Growing up like this, people learn that negativity has to be avoided or repressed. Positivity is the only option – the key to happiness. It wasn't always like this. It isn't human nature to think positively about everything. If anything, it's the opposite. Humans are naturally pretty negative. It's a product of evolution – a survival mechanism. Our brains are programmed to constantly search for threats. Negativity literally keeps us alive! So, if thinking positively doesn't come naturally, it must be cultural. Where did it all begin? Let's go back to the nineteenth century, when the United States was the “New World.” Most of the new settlers were Calvinists. They believed that humans were essentially evil sinners. Life was about working hard and hoping that God would save you from your sins – even though it was predetermined who would be saved. There wasn't much in the way of fun or hope in Calvinist society. The standard way of thinking was extremely negative. Too negative, the settlers realized. The “New World” had a branding problem. Then, along comes a man named Phineas Quimby. He's a clockmaker with an interest in hypnotism. He's also a mentalist and a mesmerist – not exactly what you would call a scientifically minded person. According to him, physical illness starts in the mind and is caused by mistaken beliefs. To cure your illness, simply change your thoughts. Think positive! Quimby became the father of the “New Thought” movement, which quickly became popular. Unsurprisingly, people loved the idea that they could gain some control over their lives simply through positive thoughts and beliefs. It was such a refreshing change from the pessimistic outlook of the Calvinists. Over the years, the New Thought movement became even more influential. Belief in the power of positive thinking spread to the medical community and psychologists. Then, in the 1930s, it became part of the recipe for power and success. According to books like *Think and Grow Rich*, you have to think positively to be successful. Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, and positive thinking has become a multibillion-dollar industry – and a fundamental part of Western culture. Toxic positivity is everywhere. And according to Goodman, not only is it not making us happy, but it's actually making many of us miserable.

Forcing people to be positive actually makes them unhappy.

Americans spend more time, energy, and money on the pursuit of happiness than any other country, and yet – you guessed it. It makes no difference. The obsession with happiness and positivity isn't working. The results of the General Social Survey show that there has been no change to levels of happiness in the US since 1972. Living in a

society of toxic positivity is also pretty exhausting. In the face of negative emotions and difficult situations that are a natural part of life, it's so hard to stay positive all the time. Goodman often sees clients who are struggling to make sense of this conflict. A woman named Tory is one of them. She reads self-help books obsessively. She makes daily gratitude lists. Her mirror is covered with Post-it notes that tell her how amazing she is. Her goal in therapy is "happiness." Tory thinks she should be happy. Her positive practices should be working. But they're not. Despite her best efforts, she often feels sad or stressed – and then guilty. What is she doing wrong? Why can't she be happy all the time? Tory's pursuit of happiness has left her feeling burnt out. She even tells Goodman that she feels like a failure. When positivity is forced on people, they often get stuck in what Goodman calls a "shame spiral." It's as unpleasant as it sounds. Basically, you feel sad and get told to "look on the bright side," or something along those lines. Or maybe you tell yourself to be more positive. Either way, the result is that you then feel guilty for feeling sad. You may also try to repress your sadness – which is a truly terrible idea, by the way. It takes a toll on your mood and your health: scientific studies show that emotional suppression can cause stress. So, really, it's OK to feel sad sometimes. It's actually better for you. Obviously, we want to avoid emotional burnout, shame spirals, and health problems. We've now seen just how toxic positivity can be. But what's the alternative? How do we deal with negative emotions? We've already looked at a few ways to help people, like listening carefully and acknowledging that a situation is difficult. But let's really break it down. According to Goodman, supporting others has four essential ingredients – curiosity, understanding, validation, and empathy. These are all great qualities. But what do they mean in practical terms? Well, here's how to respond to a friend who's telling you about their problem. Start by showing curiosity and interest. Listen actively and ask open-ended questions, like "Can you tell me more about that?" Remember that nonverbal cues, like nodding and eye contact, are important too. You want your friend to feel like they have your full attention. As you listen, try to understand why they feel this way. This allows you to validate their experience. That doesn't mean agreeing, by the way. It just means acknowledging that something is possible. You might tell your friend, "I get why you'd react like that." Once you've done all this – shown curiosity, understood, and validated your friend's feelings – you've also demonstrated empathy. You've developed a more compassionate perspective, and your friend feels supported. This is the goal. This is the alternative to toxic positivity.

Feel your feelings, practice radical acceptance, and stop chasing happiness.

So, now you may be wondering, "What about me?" You know how to support others without resorting to toxic positivity – but what about your own problems, your own difficult emotions? You'll often experience negative emotions in your life because . . . well, because you're human. Avoidance doesn't work. We've also seen how damaging suppression can be, so that's not an option either. Instead, try feeling the emotion. Feel your feelings. Sometimes, when Goodman gives this advice to her clients, they find it difficult at first. What does it mean, exactly, to "feel your feelings?" Basically, you have to let yourself experience them fully, from beginning to end. Allow a feeling to rise, peak, and then fall. Your body needs to go through the whole cycle in order to experience and process an emotion. So, when you become aware of a difficult feeling,

don't run from it. Allow yourself to notice it, recognize it. Label the emotion, if you can. Give it a name. Is it anxiety? Stress? Whatever it is, again, don't run – stick with it! The next step is to try experiencing the emotion in your body. There are many ways to do this. Goodman suggests deep breaths, crying, talking, creative expression, physical exercise, or even just sitting with the emotion. Sit with it. Let it peak, then pass. This is a useful skill you can develop with practice. Another skill you can work on is “radical acceptance.” According to Goodman, radical acceptance is the antidote to toxic positivity. Basically, it involves accepting the current situation as it is – and accepting that you can't change it. You might not like it, but you can still accept it. When you practice radical acceptance and “feel your feelings,” you accept reality. You're no longer in denial or desperately trying to sugarcoat things. While it may feel counterintuitive at first, it's actually a much better way to live. Is Goodman's advice going to make you happy? That's what you really want to know, isn't it? Well, perhaps it's time to give up on the quest for happiness, and focus on something else – something more realistic and less likely to result in disappointment. Instead of living a happiness-driven life, Goodman suggests that we should aim to live a value-driven life. Decide what's important to you, and live in accordance with your own personal values – whatever they may be. People who have solid values can judge a situation by their standards. They don't have to rely on a one-size-fits-all optimism and will ultimately lead a more fulfilling life.

To dismantle oppressive societal structures, we need to challenge the culture of toxic positivity.

We've seen how the culture of toxic positivity impacts people – how it leads to feelings of guilt, frustration, and emotional burnout. But it's not just a problem for the individual. Toxic positivity is also linked with societal issues in the US, like discrimination and inequality. You might find it challenging to understand at first – Goodman certainly did. But as she started researching these issues, she was shocked by just how powerful and pervasive toxic positivity really was. It runs deep, and it contributes to the suffering experienced by marginalized communities every day. Let's take racial inequality as an example. In positivity culture, people of color are not supposed to be too angry, negative, or abrasive. We're also expected to celebrate positive stereotypes, like the “strong Black woman.” That might not sound like a bad thing – but maybe we should be questioning why Black women have to be strong in the first place. Why does society expect this? Also, we can see something similar happening with the treatment of immigrants. They're expected to be grateful; they're discouraged from complaining. If immigrants aren't happy, society says they should “go back to where they came from.” Everyone is supposed to just get along and love each other, and there's no room for negativity. Do you see what's happening here? Positivity is being used to “keep the peace.” And when you look closer, you see that it's actually upholding oppressive structures and discouraging change. People with legitimate feelings and problems are being silenced. When a person of color or an immigrant expresses their unhappiness, it's as if they somehow threaten other people's happiness – a right that must be protected at all costs, apparently. But maybe that person is right to complain, to make some noise. After all, negativity and anger are some of the most effective forces for societal change. Clearly, positivity and the pursuit of happiness are convenient tools for keeping people quiet and submissive. It's a huge problem. And once you start to look

out for it, you see it everywhere. It's the impossible ideal of the woman who "has it all" - who's juggling a perfect family and career success while making it look effortless. It's the unfair expectation that LGBTQIA+ individuals embrace their identities happily and wholeheartedly, without any doubts. It's the unrealistic idea that we should all love our bodies unconditionally. And these are just a few examples. There are many, many more. To sum up, toxic positivity silences vulnerable and marginalized people while keeping oppressive structures in place. So instead of telling people to love themselves, to be grateful and happy, we need to start listening to them. Then, and only then, can we create real change.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: The pressure to "think positive" is harmful because it leads to feelings of guilt and emotional repression. The culture of toxic positivity has a particularly negative effect on marginalized communities, as it upholds oppressive systems. We need to stop forcing positivity - and instead start recognizing that occasional negativity is an inevitable part of the human experience. Actionable advice: Choose your positive affirmations carefully. This may surprise you, but Goodman isn't against the use of positive affirmations. However, to be effective, affirmations have to be true - or at least achievable. For example, saying "I love my body" is unlikely to work if you actually feel the opposite way. So instead, try a more flexible affirmation like "I can learn to love my body."