**How “Good Vibes Only” Hurts Us--Toxic Positivity through a Buddhist Lens (12/29/2020)**

As our society evolves and becomes more open, compassionate, and inclusive, a lot of us are striving to acknowledge and appreciate the validity of others’ identities and perspectives. Simultaneously, we’re also working on expressing *ourselves* more openly and authentically. Beyond the things that make us who we are in the grander scheme of our lives, there’s another, more fleeting aspect of who we are that needs more attention and patience. I’m talking about difficult (a.k.a. negative) emotions.

Even when we’re falling apart on the inside, we muster smiles for our friends, families, coworkers, and even strangers. When our loved ones are going through tough times, we often encourage them to see “the silver lining” and to see that “it could be much worse”. Our difficult feelings, however, are real, valid, and often constructive in a way that enriches our lives, overall.

Toxic positivity comes from the “always stay optimistic” and “good vibes only” mentalities, and we need to unlearn these mental habits.

The denial, dismissal, down-playing, or glossing-over of difficult emotions is very common. Why do we do this? We do it because we think it helps. Or maybe we do it because we think it makes it easier to deal with the awkwardness of painful moments. Maybe we do it because we feel like a failure if we’re not perfectly happy 100% of the time. It doesn’t work, though. It simply adds unnecessary and extra layers of suffering to the challenging aspects of our lives.

**Self-inflicted Toxic Positivity**

When we engage in toxic positivity toward ourselves it’s often for reasons of guilt. We don’t want to be a burden to others or bring them down with us. Other times, we try to talk ourselves out of feeling our difficult emotions by telling ourselves “so many other people have it harder than I do” or “I’m just overreacting”. We may also accuse ourselves of being ungrateful when we feel difficult emotions and try to shame ourselves into more positive emotions.

**Facing our emotional pain is the first step on the path to understanding its causes and solutions.** In the book *Good Citizens*, the Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh discusses the role of suffering in our lives. He says that without slowing down to acknowledge our suffering, it is impossible to identify the path to a more peaceful life. We also need to recognize that difficult emotions are a fundamental part of life that cannot be completely avoided. In remembering this, it puts our pain into a more holistic context. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that the lotus flower needs the mud to be nourished and to grow, just as our peace and happiness cannot exist without the opposite conditions of pain and suffering.

Realize this: *It’s not bad to feel bad*.

It’s our denial of difficult emotions that is the issue. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “We have many sufferings and it is important to call them by their true names so that we can acknowledge our suffering and see its real causes.”

**The ways we engage in toxic positivity with others**

When we engage in toxic positivity with others, it’s often for different reasons. Usually, we’re just trying to help and cheer-up or encourage the person who is upset about something. We might say things like “you’ll get over it soon” or “stop being so negative!” Or---maybe we feel responsible for someone’s difficult emotions, and to make ourselves feel less guilty, we try to convince the other that they’re overreacting and need to get over whatever the problem is (i.e. gaslighting). Needless to say, this is not okay.

**Trading toxic positivity for compassion**

It’s time to drop toxic positivity. The “good vibes only” mentality is unproductive and unhealthy. It’s *compassion* that is the key to dealing with difficult emotions in a healthy manner, whether they’re our own or someone else’s. Remember that pain is a reality of life. It creates the “mud” out of which our peace and contentment grow. Make time to feel difficult things when they arise. The acknowledgment and investigation of difficult emotions will create space to find the path to peace.

**Better ways to be there for ourselves and others through difficult emotions:**

1) Take time to experience the pain. It’s part of the process of living. Don’t shame yourself for feeling bad or set timelines for when you’re *supposed* to feel better.

“There are many ways to calm a negative energy without suppressing or fighting it. You recognize it, you smile to it, and you invite something nicer to come up and replace it; you read some inspiring words, you listen to a piece of beautiful music, you go somewhere in nature, or you do some walking meditation.” –Thich Nhat Hanh

2) Analyze the pain to find its root cause.

Keep asking yourself “why” until you reach the source of pain. You’ll know when you find it; it’ll feel raw, and if it stems from one of your own hurtful habits, it may even feel a little embarrassing. This is the beginning of letting go of the suffering.

3) Once you find the cause of your own pain, work toward creating habits and conditions that help prevent needless suffering.

Sometimes just being aware of our unhealthy habits is enough to help us create better situations, behaviors, and mental patterns.

4) Give loved ones time and space to experience their own emotions.

Don’t downplay, dismiss, or deny anyone else’s feelings. Also refrain from any language that may shame the person who’s hurting. Victim shaming is never productive.

Saying things like “I’m so sorry” or “I’m here to listen if you want to talk” will remind them that you’re ready to support them through their processing of the pain.

**Conclusion**

Difficult emotions are part of life, and there’ s no way to avoid them all the time. Practicing processing them compassionately will help us find more peace for ourselves and give us the tools to support our family, friends, colleagues… when they need someone to acknowledge their pain with them in a nonjudgmental way.