



Be positive! It's a phrase that has become a mantra to so many people in recent years – something everyone is striving for. After all, who doesn't want to see their glass as half full, the silver linings around the rain clouds and the good in every situation?

But, like Pollyanna in the novel, could being blindly optimistic lead to disappointment? Is always looking on the bright side better for us? Or can there be too much of a good thing? Are we all too busy telling ourselves – and each other – to keep our chin up and look for the rainbows in life, to actually acknowledge how we're really feeling and even deal with those feelings effectively?

In some cases, too much positivity can be bad for us. Read on to find out when it's OK to feel unhappy...

Turning toxic

Being positive is usually seen as an important thing, isn't it? In a modern world that is becoming increasingly

aware of mental health and its importance to our overall wellbeing, we are more conscious of our feelings than ever – and how important it is to feel 'good'. Maybe this explains the relatively recent focus – particularly on social media – on 'being positive'.

Of course, being positive isn't a bad thing – if it's genuine. If it's not genuine, and is being forced, that's where the problem comes in.

Plain old positivity tips into toxic positivity when you start denying your real emotions, trying to convince yourself that you're feeling something **you aren't and becoming fixated on** a state of mind that isn't real.

'We have to remember that, as humans, we're meant to feel a huge range of emotions,' says coach and mentor Gitanjali Trevorrow-Seymour, founder of the people development company, High **Definition You. 'Sadness as well as** joy, disappointment and jealousy, as well as elation and gratitude. None of these emotions is meant to be constant, it's natural for them to change – even if you do have

a naturally bright outlook, you can still feel grief and gloom, desolation and dependency.

'Even when you think about the phrase, "toxic positivity", it suggests an idea of overdosing on something, having too much of it in your body. This then leads to the idea of "detoxing" and removing it completely – which, when we're talking about positivity, doesn't make sense. Like so many things in life, it's all about balance.' >>

TOXIC POSITIVITY SAYINGS

- + 'Chin up'
- + 'Everything will be OK'
- + 'Don't worry, be happy!'
- + 'Always look on the bright side'
- + 'Everything happens for a reason!'
- + 'It could be worse'
- + 'At least...'

Dangers to yourself...

'Toxic positivity comes from the innocent misunderstanding that some of our feelings are "good", like happiness and joy, while others are "bad", such as sadness and unhappiness,' explains Gitanjali. 'And, obviously, we want more of the good. But when we label our feelings in such a way – good and bad, positive and negative – we run the danger of falsely chasing some and desperately avoiding the other. Neither are better or worse when we understand how our minds work. When we understand that feelings come from one place only – our own thinking.'

So, if you find yourself standing in front of the mirror, repeating to yourself, 'Be positive, be positive', by focusing on that and telling ourselves to feel a single emotion, we can end up suppressing and masking our real feelings. Such suppression places extra stress on the body, which can eventually lead to depression, anxiety and even physical illness.

It not only leads to guilt when we, quite naturally, experience a 'negative' emotion or feel like a failure when we haven't managed to remain 'positive' all day, but we also end up denying ourselves the true human experience that is feeling happiness and sadness and everything in between.

'Every single one of our coaching clients notices one thing very quickly – how much time they're spending stuck in what we refer to as their "BMW" (b****ing, moaning and whining). Of course, no-one wants to be stuck in that BMW, so we go to the other extreme, where we only show people our "happy" selves and act a certain way in front of them. And that isn't authentic and, ironically, doesn't feel very good,' says Gitanjali.

'It robs us of a deeper connection with those around us. We don't get to

experience that situation where we ask someone twice, "how are you?" in order to get a real answer. There's a real shallowness to that kind of positivity.'

By focusing on positivity too much, we fear the other "bad" emotions and get stuck in them. But, as humans, we get to understand how our minds work. We get to understand that 100% of our feelings come from 100% of our thinking. And, as Gitanjali says, 'I wish someone had told me this decades ago – that a feeling lasts only as long as thought.'

Sadness, anger, grief and all of the other 'negative' emotions are things to **be experienced, not 'fixed'.** And only once we have accepted ourselves – and all of our emotions – can we have truly robust mental health.

Helping others

Say, someone tells you they're going through a hard time. Maybe they've left a job, broken up with a partner or have had to move out of their dream house. They pour their heart out to you – and your response? 'Try to be positive!'

'People obviously do this with good intentions, trying to make that person **feel better or find a solution, but you** have to think about it from the receiving end. They aren't going to be enriched by that experience or feel better for it,' says Gitanjali.

'No, you're effectively brushing them off and dismissing their feelings. As a consequence, they may end up feeling as if they cannot be their true self or be able to speak up, not unless it's about something positive. They'll feel forced to put a brave face on and suppress their real experiences and emotions, which is fatiguing.'

When it comes to children, we equally shouldn't try to deny or distract them from their 'negative' feelings. We've all seen the situation



where grandparents put the TV on or hand them a bar of chocolate to distract them from their parents leaving, but Gitanjali argues that isn't good for them.

'It's a totally valid reaction for them to miss their parents and to try to distract them from their feelings means they'll learn to look outside themselves to make themselves feel better in the future, rather than to process their emotions on their own.'

The benefits of feeling 'bad'

Have you seen the Pixar movie, *Inside Out*? There's a scene where Bing Bong, the main character Riley's imaginary friend, is devastated that his rocket has been cleared away, signalling that Riley no longer needs him. Joy, the 'positive', lead emotion,

Positive vibes
A survey by Science of People found that 53% of people experience toxic positivity one to three times a week.

WORDS: SARAH WHITELEY. PHOTOS: GETTY. IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH, SEE YOUR GP



OTHER THINGS TO 'BE'

So if we aren't going to 'be positive', what else does Gitanjali suggest we should 'be'?

+ Be present

Don't focus on the past and what has already been, as that can lead to depression. Similarly, if you turn your attention to the future, it is too easy to get swept up in worries or anxiety. By staying present, we can allay a lot of these feelings.

+ Be courageous

Accept that we can't predict even our next thought, let alone the future! Be brave to stay with the discomfort and instead of seeking refuge in positivity, look with courage for the possibilities.

+ Be curious

Stay with your true emotions, rather than trying to convince yourself you're feeling something else, and see how long they last and develop. Remember, they will not remain forever.

+ Be compassionate

While many of us show compassion to other people, we need to extend this same kindness to ourselves. Allow yourself to feel your emotions truly and not feel guilty about what they are.

Humans are meant to experience a range of emotions

tries offering him solutions and distracting him from his upset, yet it makes no difference to Bing Bong's clear pain. Sadness, the 'negative' emotion, on the other hand, sits down with him and acknowledges what he has been through and what he is feeling. All the while Joy chastises her, worrying that Sadness is only making Bing Bong feel worse. But, by acknowledging his upset, Sadness allows Bing Bong to cry and express his emotions. After a second or two, he says, 'I feel better now' and literally picks himself back up.

'It's such a powerful scene, I use it in so many of my training sessions,' says Gitanjali. 'It shows, really simply, how important it is to express your thoughts and feel the emotion – and to allow others to do the same. We're all designed to "float" back to our default state of clarity and calmness, but, to do this, we need to recognise

our feelings in order to be able to move on from them.'

Like Joy, we can all be afraid when someone is upset – afraid of making them feel worse, of being negative, of saying the wrong thing entirely. But, usually, just being there for them, rather than attempting to 'fix' their problem or 'make' them happy again, can be enough.

Should we avoid affirmations?

Many people use the phrase 'be positive' and other similar sayings as affirmations, something to say to themselves every day to help them reprogramme their minds to capture empowering beliefs, habits and thought patterns. Does Gitanjali think we should give them up? 'No, not all – I use affirmations myself and they

can be a really useful tool for many people if they're used correctly,' he says. 'Next time you do yours, just ensure you take note of what you are saying and how it makes you feel when you say it. It should feel grounded and as if it has depth. If, when you repeat it to yourself, it feels shallow and as if you're trying to convince yourself of something, then pause, and take note of that.'