

Why excessive positivity is bad for your health and mental well-being

There are real benefits to a positive mindset, but the idea that we should always look on the bright side has gone too far. Research into toxic positivity can help restore balance



Having a positive mindset can result in unexpected consequences

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Are you struggling with low self-esteem? If so, you may have been told to repeat phrases such as "I am a loveable person, I am a loveable person, I am a loveable person". Positive chants like this, known as self-affirmations, are said to boost a person's mood and feelings of worth. You might think that sounds too good to be true – and you would be right. When psychologists tested the effects of this very mantra, they found that it backfired. Those participants who started out with low self-esteem ended up feeling worse. The problem was that they simply didn't believe what they were saying.

We know that [a positive attitude can be good for us](#) and that the right mindset can have a real impact on our health and happiness. But it turns out that we can have too much of a good thing. What those psychologists studying self-affirmations found was an example of "toxic positivity" – the idea that a forced optimistic interpretation of our experiences alongside the suppression of negative emotions can do real damage. The term has become something of a buzzword in both academia and pop culture. Yet despite this, messaging that "happiness is a choice" and "positivity is a mindset" abounds.

[How to take control of your self-narrative for a better, happier life](#)

What's required is a rebalance. It isn't enough to say that excessive positivity can be toxic. We need to know when that

is the case, why and for whom. Luckily, there is a growing body of research addressing these questions. Armed with this knowledge, we can make healthier choices that help us avoid toxic positivity, both for ourselves and for society as a whole.

What is considered toxic positivity?

Our tendency to eschew the darker aspects of human experience isn't new, especially in Western societies.

Longstanding rules about how we display our emotions have led people to develop strategies to avoid negative ones, says [Susan David](#) at Harvard Medical School, who calls this the "tyranny of positivity".

Beginning in the industrial revolution, socioeconomic goals around productivity and efficiency contributed to a culture where emotions, especially paralysing ones like sadness, were seen as handbrakes to economic output: "keep calm and carry on", as the saying goes. "Faith, religion and, to a degree, magical thinking also played a part," says David. If someone was struggling, they were exhorted to have more faith rather than encouraged to explore the root causes. Science must also take some blame. Historically, psychologists didn't consider emotions as valid phenomena to study, so there was little understanding of the important effects they have on our mental state.

Fast-forward to 1998 and the emergence of the positive psychology movement. This marked a big advance for psychological research in general because it shifted the focus from studying mental health conditions and negative thinking towards the things people needed in order to flourish. Even so, positive psychology has been [criticised for various reasons](#), including overstating the degree to which we have control over our emotional states and assuming certain emotions are inherently good for us and others inherently bad. Initially, it also overlooked the role that negative emotions play in our overall psychological well-being, although this failing was addressed as the field matured.

In large part, proponents of the “happiness is a mindset” mantra have echoed a simplified, pop version of the early insights of positive psychology. They urge us to inject a bit of – insert positive emotion here – into our day to harness the benefits. They tell us that our psychology can be “hacked” through a positive mindset. And they counsel anyone having a bad time with trite phrases such as “it’s going to be OK” and “focus on the good things”. In its worst incarnation, it preaches the pseudoscientific idea that you can “manifest” material comfort and health through thought alone. Known as the “law of attraction”, this has been promoted in self-help books.

[How to understand your inner voice and control your inner critic](#)

[Most of us have a voice inside our heads and it can be caring, supportive, negative or critical. Learning to control this internal monologue could help you cope with daily stress](#)

Perhaps it isn't surprising that we want to believe things will turn out better for us if we have a positive attitude. After all, there is a growing body of research indicating that an [optimistic outlook on life does have benefits](#). For example, the right mindset can trigger physiological changes that can help you become [fitter, more energetic and less stressed](#). It is also well established that psychological stress can have

[detrimental effects on the body](#), from the cardiovascular and nervous systems to hormones and reproduction. The state of your mind undoubtedly affects the state of your body, and vice versa.

Life can be tough, and pretending otherwise can increase your risk of dying at an early age

Robin Utrecht/Shutterstock

It also isn't surprising that we consider certain emotions to be inherently bad, because those like anger, guilt, fear and resentment do feel unpleasant. When we experience them, we can become consumed, agitated or paralysed with inactivity. Such negative emotions can leave us feeling as though we have been robbed of our agency to interact with the world in a measured, meaningful way. It can seem like we

have been hijacked by our emotions.

The dark side of positivity

Nevertheless, it is becoming apparent that positivity has its limits. In 2021, a meta-analysis (a study of studies) with a combined total of more than 217,000 participants investigated the link between optimism, pessimism and mortality. It found that an optimistic outlook was indeed associated with lower instances of death from any cause over the course of the studies. However, both unrealistic optimism and pessimism were [linked to a higher risk of mortality](#).

What's more, a large body of research now demonstrates that ignoring negative emotions can be harmful to our mental well-being. In one study, published in 2022, an international group of psychologists explored how societal pressure to be happy affects people in 40 countries. They found that [it can be detrimental to our psychological well-being](#) when we inevitably experience negative emotions. This was particularly the case in countries with high national happiness levels, as measured by the [World Happiness Index](#).

[How to be happy, according to the longest-running study of happiness](#)

Social media and the positively curated images of ourselves we create online [add to this pressure to be happy](#), says [Brock Bastian](#) at the University of Melbourne in Australia, who was part of the research team. “When we are not willing to accept negative emotions as a part of life, this can mean that we may see negative emotions as a sign there is something wrong with us,” he says. In other words, with an overemphasis on positivity, we are more likely to perceive normal emotions, such as sadness and anxiety, as signs of a mental health condition needing treatment.

Research by [Maya Tamir](#) at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem highlights another reason why excess positivity may be toxic. She and her colleagues studied more than 2300 people from eight countries to explore whether the secret of happiness lies in experiencing more pleasant emotions or, as Aristotle argued, in experiencing the emotions we want to experience. They found that, regardless of culture, greater mental well-being is linked with [feeling emotions that we believe are appropriate](#) to our situation, rather than just having positive emotions regardless of context – “feeling right” as opposed to “feeling good”, is how they put it. We should be concerned if we don’t feel angry when we witness someone being exploited, for example. Such emotional episodes, while experientially unpleasant, indicate that we are ready to behave in accordance with our values. For Tamir, emotions can be

thought of as a toolbox that helps us attain those goals that are important to us.

How to regulate your emotions

Tamir is particularly interested in how and why people regulate their emotions. She believes that to understand this, you need to know how they want to feel in different contexts. "I think that people do want to feel good, but I think there are several different definitions of good," [she says](#). In the context of emotions, "good" can mean the presence of pleasurable emotions, but it can also involve things that are helpful and things that are meaningful, she adds. And emotions that are helpful or meaningful often aren't pleasant while you are experiencing them.

That isn't to say that we don't try to regulate unpleasant emotions. We are often confronted with unwanted feelings – we might be nervous before speaking in public, for example, or guilty because we have neglected a relationship – so we develop strategies such as suppression and avoidance to help us change our emotional state. For other emotion researchers, toxic positivity is a form of suppression that tells us we can alter how we feel by sheer force of will. "Part of why positive thinking has erroneously embedded itself within Western ideas of what it means to be psychologically healthy is because it centres around a narrative that you are in control of your emotions," says David.

The message that you are in control of how you feel may seem empowering, but, whether we like it or not, there are things outside of us that influence our emotional state. Throughout our lives, we will have relationships that end, we will face loss and disappointment, and some days we will just feel down without knowing why. "So-called negative emotions are an inevitable part of the human experience, they are unavoidable," says David. The idea that we can simply suppress them stigmatises those who are suffering, and those with mental health conditions, as lacking willpower or being mentally weak.

Older people tend to accept negative emotions more readily than younger people and benefit from it

Steve McCurry/Magnum Photos

It also divides people along socioeconomic lines. [Many studies show](#) that socioeconomic status is linked with people's feelings of control over their lives, and psychologists have found that worse-off individuals tend to see their situation as caused by bad luck – they have what is known as [an external locus of control](#). By contrast, people who are doing well in life tend to attribute their good fortune to hard work and the choices they have made. This internal locus of control makes wealthy individuals more predisposed to messages of positive thinking. And, of course, they have the resources to prop up a self-help industry that tells them what they want to hear: that they are the architects of their own well-being.

Escaping the toxic positivity trap

How can we escape the tyranny of positivity? David points out that while suppressing negative emotions is harmful to psychological health, we must be careful not to go too far the other way. Dwelling on negative emotions, or rumination, isn't a healthy strategy either because we can get stuck in circular loops of reasoning where we feel bad for feeling bad. Instead, she says, we need to be able to sit with uncomfortable emotions, accept them as a normal part of human experience, and learn to understand that they play an important role in our mental health.

Research shows that [when people accepted their negative](#)

[emotions](#) – rather than judging mental experiences as being good or bad – they became more emotionally resilient, experiencing fewer negative feelings in response to environmental stressors and attaining a greater sense of well-being.

Acceptance as a strategy for regulating emotions entails not judging oneself for feeling negative emotions but simply experiencing them and understanding that they will pass. The good news is that, [as we age, we increasingly rely on acceptance](#) – which might help explain why older people tend to report better emotional well-being. But, says David, given the right environment, acceptance can be nurtured from a young age. What's needed, she argues, is a "secure base". When we have a support network that tells us it is alright to feel a certain way, we can explore ways to cope with negative feelings and to inhabit new emotional spaces, without judgement.

Witnessing a child, partner or friend in distress can be painful, and helping them to develop healthy strategies to regulate their emotions often involves having difficult conversations. But offering inauthentic advice such as "just be positive" is likely to backfire. It may make you feel better but, as that [study on self-affirmations revealed](#), when people are most in need of a boost, forced positivity can make them feel worse. "When we tell someone to 'just be positive', we

are telling them that my comfort is more important than your reality," says David.

[The mental tricks you can use in your lifelong pursuit of happiness](#)

Instead, when someone close comes to you in a time of emotional turmoil, one of the best things you can do is listen. Surprisingly, that simple act won't just help them, it could also benefit you. When researchers scanned people's brains when they and a partner were exposed to distressing images, they found that allowing someone who is experiencing negative emotions to feel heard and vent [reduced stress in the listener as much as in the speaker](#).

While trying to rebalance the way we think about and experience emotions, we shouldn't throw out positivity altogether. The right amount of it in the right place and at the right time can work wonders. But we also need to allow space for people to accept the adversity that comes with life. Resilience and growth are attained when we fight through difficult situations. "It's not about control over our emotions, but moving to a place where we can understand their wisdom," says David. "Our emotions reveal our values to us, who and what we care about. Having the tools to reach a point of acceptance with our emotions is part of what it means to be psychologically healthy."

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