

Toxic Positivity: The Dark Side of Optimism

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“Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them.” – Epictetus, Enchiridion. Although being commonly perceived as a modern lifestyle, the concept of utilizing optimism to improve the standard of one’s life is one that has historically existed for millennia. Dating back anywhere between 341-271 BCE, the quote I have just presented is defensible proof of it. Optimism as a societal construct is regularly viewed as the quality of turning any given situation into a positive once with the aid of an open mind-set. Its purpose is to generate opportunities and ease misfortune. Positivity in this sense is often seen as a choice as the way a situation is perceived has been proven various times to have a significant impact on the effect it has on a person. The basic principle is that if one does not treat a situation as terrifying, sorrowful or infuriating, your brain will not perceive it as such. This would make life seem more joyful and exciting to the optimist than to the regular person.

To many people in this day and age, optimism has an important role in their personal lives. It is often seen as the preferred choice in contrast to its counterparts (realism and pessimism). This extremely common opinion is in sooth suggested and influenced by different aspects of modern society. In the school environment, children and adolescents alike are particularly exposed to optimistic ideals. Throughout our infancy and later stages of cognitive development, children are frequently taught to see situations in a positive light, to take advantage of the opportunities they are given and embrace mistakes as tools for farther learning. Despite what the remainder of this may suggest, I do not think that is an abysmal concept. As human beings, we will have to face negative situations at some stage in our lives, and I deeply believe that we should be educated on how to face those difficult circumstances, in such a manner that when the time arrives, it is within our abilities to act rationally and safely. Personally, having the skill to take a step back and see that same situation in a more controlled, manageable way has without a doubt improved my life experiences. With the ominous threat of occurrences such as the cost-of-living crisis, the ongoing impact from the recent COVID 19 pandemic, unemployment and more threatening various households in the UK currently, positive thinking is a valuable asset to someone’s psychology. But how much can we truly rely on positivity to aid us in resolving our problems?

As I have stated previously, optimism in moderation is indeed a positive thing. However, there are various psychological risks associated with this mind-set. Emotional suppression is one of the first negative side-affects one can experience. This happens when undesirable emotions are pushed ‘out of mind’ and overlooked. Entrapping and ignoring your feelings can lead to outbursts because the person in question has not acted upon the emotions and often has not managed to rid of the problem that caused them but rather to ‘just deal with it’ – this can put someone in a constant state of irritation or discomfort. This unhealthy focus on happiness can lead someone to believe that the ordinary emotions they are feeling are unacceptable. It can also make it less likely that one can realise when they are in danger as natural fight

or flight signals from the amygdala (the part of your brain responsible for most emotional responses) that should be setting off red flags and making someone acknowledge that all is not well are being repressed. Most professionals agree that emotion is relative; without negative feelings to compare to, your brain will eventually cease to recognise positive occurrences that should bring genuine feelings of joy. After a while, most optimists report that their happiness feels 'forced' or 'unnatural' and brings with it an underwhelming wave of neutrality. I can also testify as this is something that has happened to me personally. This type of toxic positivity can trigger multiple mental health issues, including but not limited to anxiety, emotional deprivation and depression.

Positive emotions are just as healthy and important as negative ones, and when all is said and done feelings are tools, we are provided with to help us solve problems and live a better, healthier life. Our emotions are there to ensure we see every situation for what it is and to aid us in exploring our existence and finding ourselves. Feelings are there for a reason, no matter how unpleasant or mirthless they can be at times. In order to truly invoke every opportunity, we need to acknowledge and embrace the natural responses our body has to different situations. There is no shame in feeling despondent, furious, terrified or disheartened. Let yourself feel. Optimism made me see the world as a place that was to be endured – a cruel mistress that I had to manipulate in order to be content, but it is so much more than that. It is with that frustration, that lachrymosity that we can act upon, that brings us fairness and joy. Those moments of beauty do exist, but it is not about closing your eyes and allowing your imagination to twist the situation into something that it's not, but making the decision to open them, and allowing yourself to look.