



Toxic Positivity

In a society preoccupied with “good vibes”, it can be hard to ignore the social pressures pushing positivity. Although holding an optimistic outlook isn’t inherently a bad thing, the endless pursuit of positivity can become problematic (Davis, 2022b; Ford & Mauss, 2013).

What is toxic positivity?

Toxic positivity is the denial and rejection of stress, negativity, or any emotions that can be perceived as bad, in favour of positivity and optimistic perspectives (Davis, 2022b; Goodman, 2022; Beremejo et al., 2021; Kaufman, 2021). Lukin (2019) defined Toxic Positivity as the practice of portraying yourself as solely optimistic and rejecting anything associated with any negative emotions (Beremejo et al., 2021).

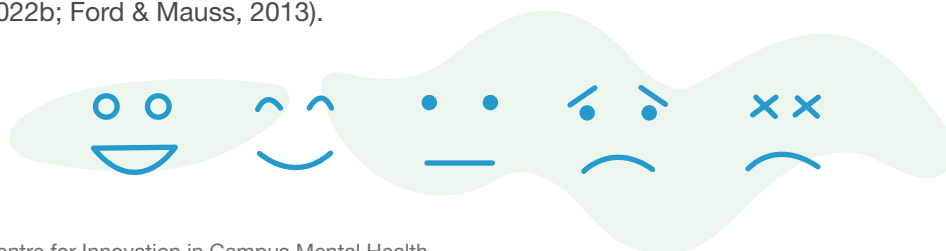
Toxic positivity can be experienced both in interpersonal interactions, or individually through self-talk and personal expectations. In the case of interpersonal interactions, though the circumstances where positivity becomes toxic are typically in conversation with well-intentioned counterparts, the interactions are often dismissive of the feelings being presented or felt by the individual (Goodman, 2022; Davis, 2022b). This dismissal can result in feelings of judgement, misunderstanding, silencing, and the suppression and denial of emotions (Goodman, 2022).

*“Healthy positivity makes room for hope and reality”
- Goodman, 2022*

What can make positivity toxic?

Positivity is adaptive and generally good for one’s well-being, but only so long as it is not used to deny or suppress emotions (Davis, 2022b). Research has shown that seeking to always be positive, regardless of the situation or context, can have a negative impact on our well-being and adaptability (Ford & Mauss, 2013). For example, research identified that happiness was a highly desired and important goal among American post-secondary students. However, the same demographic experienced lower social supports and academic success due to their desire to present as happy when another emotion (e.g.: sadness, anger, confusion, etc.) would have been more appropriate (Ford & Mauss, 2013).

Studies have shown that placing a high value on happiness can not only make it less attainable but has also been shown to be associated with both clinically identified, and self-reported depression and depressive symptoms. In correlational studies, the more people valued happiness, the more likely they were to report lower emotional well-being (Ford & Mauss, 2013; Ford et al., 2014). People who place a high value on positivity and optimism tend to also have high expectations of their ability to achieve and maintain those states. This increased personal expectation can be harmful if in the end what they feel does not reflect the happiness they desire (Davis, 2022b; Ford & Mauss, 2013).



Negative Emotions

It is important to establish that describing an emotion as negative does not mean that it is bad or wrong. Negative emotions are commonly thought of as emotions that are disruptive or unpleasant, but they also provide valuable information into how we feel and how we might get our needs met (Davis, 2022b).

Negative emotions vary, and like all emotions, the way they are expressed is dependent on many intersecting behavioural, experiential, and physiological factors (Gross, 2002). The desire or act of regulating our emotions can happen consciously or subconsciously (Gross, 2002), but acknowledging and allowing time to process the genuine emotion and subsequent feelings can have a positive impact on our overall health and well-being (Davis, 2022b; Ford & Mauss, 2013; Ford et al., 2014; Cullen, 2020).

Here is a list of common negative emotions derived from Plutchik's wheel of emotions (Davis, 2022a):

Terror, Fear, Apprehension – Rage, Anger, Annoyance – Loathing, Disgust, Boredom – Grief, Sadness, Pensiveness.



DID YOU KNOW: Emotional suppression, the act of inhibiting the external expressions of your internal feelings, can not only have a detrimental impact on mental health but can also lead to stress-related illnesses – including suppressing the body's immune responses (Cullen, 2020; Patel & Patel, 2019).

Emotional Suppression

Emotional Suppression can occur when we internalize the belief that negative emotions are “bad” or “wrong”. This act of hiding our true feelings not only feels worse in the moment, but can be detrimental to our mental, physical, and social health (Davis, 2022a; Gross, 2002; Goodman, 2022; Boland et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2021; Shahar et al., 2018).

Studies have shown that emotional suppression can have long-term psychological impacts, including depression, anxiety, and stress-related illnesses (Boland et al., 2019; Cullen, 2020). It can also impact our social relationships by exhausting cognitive resources, decreasing emotion-related expressive behaviours (both positive and negative), and concealing social cues that are useful when engaging with others (Gross, 2002; Boland et al., 2019).

Conversely, accepting and expressing a variety of positive and negative emotions not only helps us adapt more easily to common life situations (Ford & Mauss, 2013), but can increase intimacy and supportive behaviours in interpersonal relationships (Davis, 2022a). Research in “post-traumatic growth” has shown that some people experience growth after processing difficult events in their lives. Some of these areas of growth include an increased sense of compassion, a sense of purpose, recognizing personal strengths, and creativity (Kaufman, 2021).

Tips for challenging internalized toxic positivity:

- ▲ Give yourself permission to feel your feelings (both positive and negative).
- ▲ Remember that all emotions are valid.
- ▲ Reflect on how you feel in the moment. Emotions and feelings can help provide valuable situational information.
- ▲ Practice mindfulness or mindful reflection. Click [here](#) to watch a CICMH webinar on Mindfulness.
- ▲ Seek non-judgemental support from individuals you trust to acknowledge and validate you (friends, family, therapist, etc.).

Reminders for supporters.

○ Don't assume that what might be helpful for you will be helpful to someone else. Ask them what might be helpful, whether it is a listening ear, help with problem solving, resources or a meal.

○ Try to avoid using common sayings or defaulting to your own experiences of overcoming hardship. Phrases like "Good vibes only", "Look on the bright side" or "Don't worry about it" can be a denial of their reality and dismissive of their feelings. Life can be challenging and trying to put a positive spin on a difficult situation may not only be unhelpful but could also set unrealistic expectations.

○ Validate their experience by recognizing and acknowledging the truth in the challenges that they're experiencing without judgement.

○ Be honest about your capacity to provide support. Awareness of your own emotional **boundaries** can ensure that you are able to be genuinely supportive.

○ Remember that you don't have to "fix" anyone's problems. Allowing the person to experience their authentic emotions without suppressing, repressing, or masking is an act of support.



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