



## What Is Toxic Positivity? Why It's OK To Not Be OK Right Now.

If you're telling yourself everything will be fine and focusing only on positive or happy emotions during the coronavirus pandemic, you probably need to read this.

By Brittany Wong

"Everything will be fine." "This too shall pass." "Stay positive! It could be worse."

If you've ever gone through a difficult time (a breakup, a job loss), you've probably heard some of these phrases ad nauseam from friends and family. People who say them no doubt have good intentions; they're simply trying to put a rosy filter on the tough time you're having. "It gets better, stay optimistic," they assure you.

But if statements like this are all you're hearing from your friends and family, that excess of positivity can be, well, negative.

This kind of encouragement and self-talk is so common that mental health experts have a name for it: toxic positivity.

"Toxic positivity is the idea that we should focus only on positive emotions and the positive aspects of life," said Heather Monroe, a clinical social worker and director of program development at Newport Institute. "It's the belief that if we ignore difficult emotions and the parts of our life that aren't working as well, we'll be much happier."

The problem is, toxic positivity oversimplifies the human brain and how we process emotions, and it can actually be detrimental to our mental health, Monroe said.

"You can fight toxic positivity by acknowledging or recognizing that multiple complex emotions can exist in you all at once." - JENNY MAENPAA, NEW YORK CITY THERAPIST

"There can be long-term effects of toxic positivity including encouraging a person to remain silent about their struggles," Monroe said. "Feeling connected to and heard by others is one of the most powerful antidotes to depression and anxiety, while isolation

fuels these emotional issues. Often, trying to hide or deny feelings can lead to more stress on the body and increased difficulty in avoiding upsetting emotions.”

Unblinking optimism and shutting the door on negative feelings doesn't make them go away; if anything, it exacerbates them.

### **Toxic positivity has gone into overdrive amid COVID-19.**

Given the collective trauma we're all experiencing with the coronavirus pandemic, toxic positivity is an especially relevant concept right now.

All those Instagram posts saying we need to lean into this experience, embrace spending more time with our family, get fit, pick up a new hobby, learn a new language, and finally write that novel? That's toxic positivity, said Noel McDermott, a psychotherapist in London.

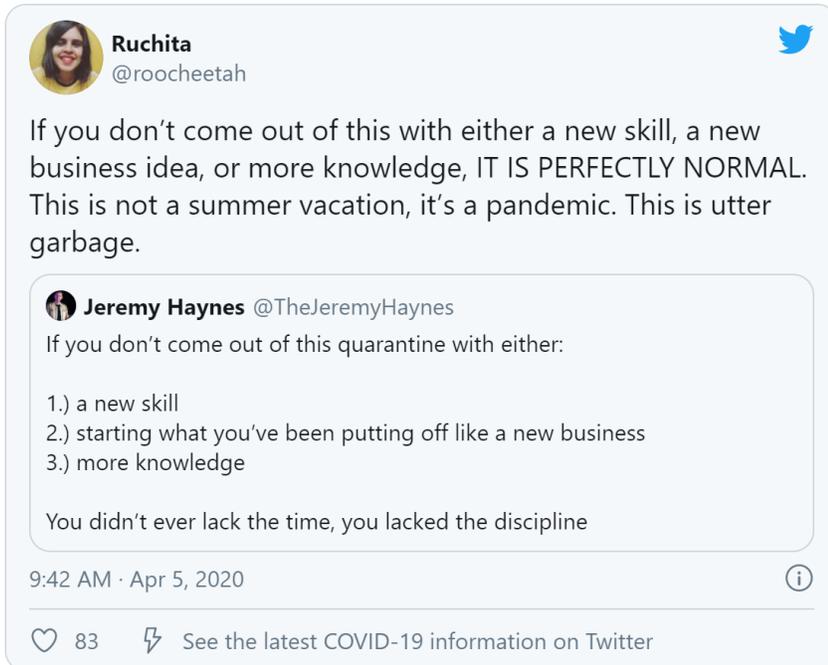
“One of the biggest examples of toxic positivity is in the area of denial of the traumatic nature of the pandemic,” McDermott said. “You see it when people only promote the positive experience of lockdown in which they have been on a journey of self-development, learning to live in peace with their inner world.”

He added: “Even in normal times, becoming more inwardly focused is always a challenge, as we all have inner demons.”

Toxic positivity subtly — or not so subtly, as shown in the viral tweet below — suggests that if you're not staying positive about this pandemic, you're in the wrong headspace.

It delegitimizes the very legitimate worries people have about their health, their family and friends' health, and putting food on the table while unemployed or worrying about job security.

With the pandemic, the act of survival is mentally exhausting; few want to work on their side hustle or learn a second language when they're worried about their families and saying goodbye to COVID-stricken loved ones via Zoom funerals.



As one man replied to the productivity-pushing tweet above: “Most of us will be more than satisfied if we get through this without losing family members

Of course, we can be a victim of our own toxic positivity, too. Think about your current outlook: Are you forcing toxic positivity on yourself during this pandemic? Have you given yourself time to sit with your grief and uneasiness over how life has changed? Or do you push those thoughts away as quickly as possible so you can focus on staying positive and grateful for what you do have?

Obviously, there's nothing wrong with counting your blessings during such a dark time. But you can do so while also acknowledging your uneasiness, said Jenny Maenpaa, a therapist in New York City.

“You can fight toxic positivity by acknowledging or recognizing that multiple complex emotions can exist in you all at once,” Maenpaa said. “You can be devastated at the loss of life from COVID-19 and enjoy the hygge of quarantine.”

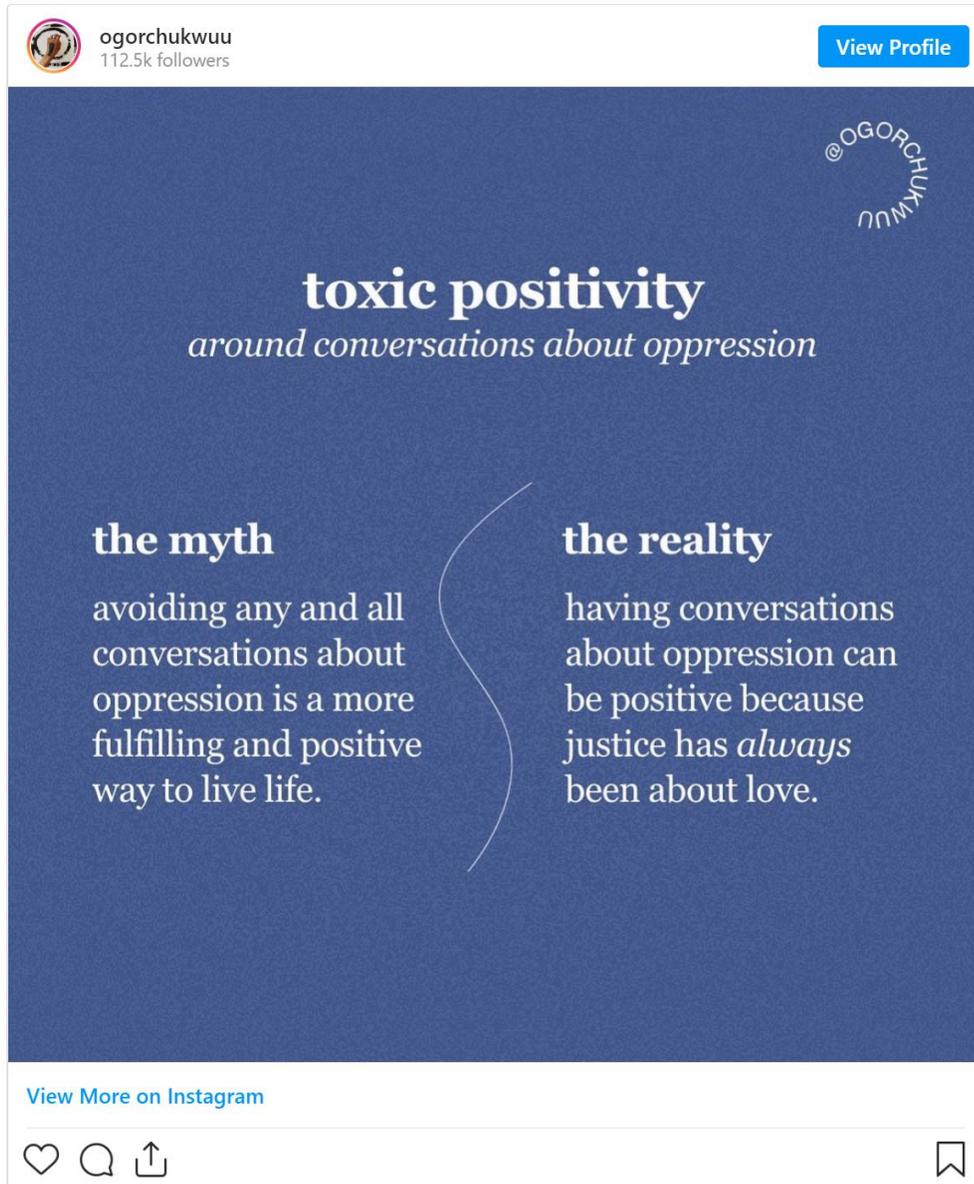
### **Toxic positivity can be applied to systemic racism, too.**

Toxic positivity can also affect how people see and respond to calls for racial justice.

The toxic positivity pusher might listen to someone share their personal stories involving racism and downplay it. They might offer some platitudes about the need for love and

peace and positive thinking. They definitely don't want to dwell on the negative, as Jacquelyn Ogorchukwu Iyama pointed out recently in an Instagram post about toxic positivity and racial oppression.

They might say that focusing on race is damaging to our progress and that "avoiding any and all conversations is a more fulfilling and positive way to live life," Iyama explained.



Of course, Black Americans and other people of color know positivity alone isn't going to dismantle systematic racism.

“It’s problematic to say that the damage these social realities create can only be dealt with at the level of individual psychology,” McDermott said.

The therapist used the example of a woman in an abusive relationship to illustrate his point.

“A woman experiencing domestic abuse can’t be counseled to learn great positive psychology tools as a way of managing the abuse and staying in the abuse,” McDermott said. “She should be counseled to take action to get to physical safety and also take psychological action to recover from the abuse.”

The same principle holds for racism. Social action must be taken to correct social injustices and dismantle white supremacy. Putting the burden on a Black person to “stay positive” is an insult to their lived experiences and an example of white complacency.

“Psychological action alone is never going to suffice here,” McDermott said.

So, now that we know that positivity pushing isn’t the way to address troubling times, what’s a better route to take? Here’s what the experts said:

### **1. Give yourself permission to have both negative and positive emotions.**

Remind yourself that you’re capable of holding multiple perspectives about uncertain or troubling situations, even when you’re in the thick of it. Lean into the positive and the negative. Be realistic.

“Practice gratitude for what you do have, but also be honest and express what is bothering you, like missed celebrations or worries about the future in the case of this pandemic,” Monroe said.

### **2. Take a deeper look at your anxiety through journaling or mental exercises.**

Luckily, there are strategies for examining our own anxieties and managing them, Maenpaa said. Deep breathing techniques coupled with guided meditations that recognize the fear and acknowledge it in order to keep moving forward are often helpful.

“Another strategy is to journal before bed or any time you're feeling overwhelmed, because our brains can hold many short-term thoughts in it at once just in case we need them at a moment's notice,” she said.

“This means that when we're thinking about our fears or anxieties, our brain codes them as important and keeps them at the forefront,” Maenpaa explained. “By writing down those fears and anxieties, even if we can't do anything about them, we've told our brains that it's OK to let them go because they're being taken care of.”

When Maenpaa is struggling to accept and balance seemingly conflicting emotions during rough patches in her life, she uses the old improv exercise of “yes and ...?”

“For example, I'll say, 'I am so grateful to have a roof over my head and I hate the job that's continuing to pay me in order to afford that roof.' Or ‘I'm afraid of what the future holds and I feel some excitement at the hope some things may change for the better.’”

“When we give ourselves permission to hold multiple seemingly conflicting truths in our minds at the same time, we can eliminate the tension between them and give room to all of our positive and negative emotions,” Maenpaa explained.

### **3. Once you've explored what's causing you anxiety, make an extra effort to take care of yourself.**

There's no actionable advice built into toxic positivity. It's just “hang in there, things will get better eventually!”

One action you can take when dealing with uncertainty? Make a project of simply taking care of yourself. You're going through a lot right now, and it wouldn't hurt to baby yourself a little.

“Taking action for yourself means you sort out your sleep hygiene, exercise regularly, eat well and keep a healthy mealtime routine, hydrate and talk more about your worries to loved ones and friends,” McDermott said. “You also might develop a habit of mind that allows you to find meaning in struggle, whether that be through religion, spiritual practice or by attaching to larger causes.”

If you follow that advice, you're giving yourself agency, whereas toxic positivity just gives you nice-sounding, but empty platitudes.

Toxic positivity “would have us deny the psychological warning signs of distress that are trying to tell us to take care,” McDermott said. “In times like these, we have to take extra care of ourselves.”

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