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HAPPY OR HURTING?

MiNDFOOD (Australia), Sydney



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HAPPY OR HURTING?

Toxic positivity can take many forms – how often do we hear things like ‘everything happens for a reason’? But are we becoming immune to it, and what’s the real effect on our mental health?

WORDS BY CAT RODIE

It's a phrase we hear all too often: "Things always work out for the best". On the surface, the words are well meaning, but for Joanne, they were a huge slap in the face.

"I was going through a really tough patch," she recalls. "I needed some support – but when my friends tried to cheer me up with platitudes, I started to feel like I was making a fuss about nothing. It was like they didn't hear what I was saying at all."

It wasn't just in conversations with her friends, though. Every time Joanne turned to Facebook or Instagram, she felt the same crushing sense that her

depression was somehow her own fault. "I started to wonder why I couldn't just snap out of it," she says.

"Just be positive!" "Good vibes only!" "Think happy thoughts!" These are all classic quotes often repeated in the phenomenon psychologists are now referring to as 'toxic positivity'. While the sentiments being expressed appear initially to be positive, they're actually undermining our mental health.

"We've confused being happy with the ability to apply a positive mindset," explains Jocelyn Brewer – a registered psychologist. "Many examples of toxic positivity are actually just shallow or

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JOCELYN BREWER

simplistic sayings that gloss over the more nuanced issues of dealing with life's ups and downs."

GOING MAINSTREAM

Toxic positivity has become so common that you might not even recognise it at first – but when you start looking, you're sure to find it everywhere. It's in advertising, on T-shirt slogans, in pop songs and on social media – where the issue is particularly rife.

Brewer notes that toxic positivity is especially ingrained in social media because it was platforms like Facebook



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Toxic positivity is particularly prevalent on social media.

LET YOURSELF FEEL BAD

In direct opposition to 'just being positive', research suggests that allowing yourself to experience a spectrum of unpleasant emotions will actually help you feel better in the long run. A 2017 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* asked participants to fill out a survey to see how strongly they agreed with statements such as "I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way that I'm feeling". Across the board, the researchers found that people who didn't seem to 'feel bad about feeling bad' showed higher levels of wellbeing than their counterparts who beat themselves up about feeling negative emotions. The researchers concluded that "individuals who accept rather than judge their mental experiences may attain better psychological health".

and Instagram that really allowed it to grow. "It's easy for people to share 'inspo', and sunsets and hashtags, but it's not so easy to have confronting or meaningful conversations and simply hold a space for people when life isn't all green smoothies and yoga postures," she explains.

It may seem innocent enough – you see a meme with a nice message and you hit share. It's a little piece of brightness among all the scary news stories and the enviable holiday snaps your friends put up. But the problem is that those colourful memes might actually contribute to people feeling

unsupported or invalidated when they voice any negative feelings. "It can stop people from sharing their authentic feelings and seeking help," Brewer explains.

In face-to-face conversations, toxic positivity can be particularly galling. Brewer says that sometimes people are not equipped to listen and engage with tough issues, so falling back on convenient clichés such as "everything happens for a reason" is an easy way to respond.

Essentially, then, toxic positivity discourages us from having the hard conversations. "It's important that we recognise toxic positivity, so we can have more meaningful conversations and develop our mental health literacy," Brewer says.

So how should you respond to your friends when they offer toxic positivity instead of genuine support? Brewer warns that it can be tricky, but suggests being upfront and just asking directly for support. "Use a statement like, 'It would be great if you could just listen, you don't have to fix anything'. Or you can preface a conversation with a statement like, 'I would like to share something with you, but I don't want any advice,'" she says.

In contrast to the quick fix and 'good vibes only' mentality that toxic positivity promotes, research reveals that refusing to accept our negative emotions only makes us feel worse.

CHASING HAPPINESS

A 2018 study published in the *Emotion* journal found that chasing happiness can cause us to obsess over failure and negative emotions when they inevitably do happen, ultimately making us more unhappy overall.

Speaking to *Time* magazine, the study's co-author, Brock Bastian – a social psychologist at the University of Melbourne's School of Psychological Sciences – said that while happiness is absolutely a good thing, making it out to be something that must be achieved only sets us up to fail.

He said, "Our work shows that [chasing happiness] changes how people respond to their negative emotions and experiences, leading them to feel worse about these and to ruminate on them more."

Of course, having a positive mindset is important to help us see the best in situations and get through life – but as Brewer explains, there is a difference between having a positive outlook and toxic positivity. "Toxic positivity takes a positive

mindset, and the research that supports positive psychology, and dilutes it," she says.

Another problem with the constant stream of toxic positivity that social media exposes us to is inspiration exhaustion. "Our brains are so primed to these messages, they lose their power and potential," says Brewer. "[Toxic positivity memes] become like white noise that clutter your conscious awareness and your attention to them declines."

Brewer notes that because many of us engage in fairly mindless social media habits, we're often not engaged with what we're seeing – we just keep scrolling. The problem with this is it stops us from ever being alone with our thoughts. "Being alone with our thoughts and present to ourselves is uncomfortable and confronting. We need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable," Brewer explains.

'UNSPIRATIONAL' BACKLASH

For people fed up with toxic positivity, there is the 'unspirational' movement. Social media posts with the hashtag #unspirational include demotivating and sarcastic quotes (for example, 'she believed she could, but she was tired so she didn't') and a cluster of 'reality check' accounts that aim to swing the pendulum back towards not only what is real, but also what's realistic.

Joanne knew she needed proper support, and went for professional counselling. During her recovery the #unspirational movement has been a lifeline. "I started out by posting my own 'keeping it real' updates about what was happening in my life," she says. "There were always a few 'things happen for a reason' comments – but there were also people who said they needed to hear [what I had to say]."

"Life isn't 'good vibes only', as the meme suggests. Life is all sorts of vibes, and they're all okay." 🙌



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