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 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...
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 these 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 feel unhappier overall.

Speaking to Fine 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 "unsspirational" movement. Social media posts with the hashtag #unspirational include demotivating and sarcastic quotes (for example, 'I believed she could, but she was tired so she didn't').

In face-to-face conversations, and online on social media, Brewer notes that because many of us are so primed to these messages, they lose their power and potential.

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.