

How to avoid 'toxic positivity' and take the less direct route to happiness

November 1 2021, by Brock Bastian, Ashley Humphrey



Credit: Gabrielle Henderson/Unsplash

The term "[toxic positivity](#)" has received a good deal of attention lately. Coming off the back of the "positivity movement" we are beginning to recognize while feeling happy is a good thing, overemphasizing the importance of a positive attitude can backfire, ironically leading to more unhappiness.

Yes, research shows happier people tend to live longer, be healthier and

enjoy more successful [lives](#). And "very happy people" have more of these benefits relative to only averagely happy [people](#). But pursued in certain ways, happiness or positivity can become toxic.

Our research, published in [The Journal of Positive Psychology](#) and involving almost 500 people, was inspired by these apparently inconsistent findings—pursuing happiness may be both good and bad for our well-being. We aimed to uncover a key ingredient that turns positivity toxic.

Expecting the best, feeling worse

Some studies have shown that when people place a high value on their own happiness it can lead to less happiness, especially in contexts where they most expect to feel [happy](#).

This tendency to expect happiness and then to feel disappointed or to blame oneself for not feeling happy enough, has been linked to greater depressive [symptoms](#) and deficits in [well-being](#).

As the line to a cartoon by [Randy Glasbergen](#) depicting a patient confessing to his psychologist puts it: "I am very, very happy. But I want to be very, very, very happy, and that is why I'm miserable."

However, [researchers](#) have also observed when people prioritize behaviors that maximize the likelihood of their future happiness—rather than attempting to directly increase their levels of happiness "in the moment"—they are more likely to experience improvements (rather than deficits) in their levels of well-being.

This may mean engaging in activities that provide a sense of achievement or purpose, such as volunteering time or completing difficult tasks, or constructing daily routines that support well-being.

This work suggests pursuing happiness indirectly, rather than making it the main focus, could turn our search for positivity from toxic to tonic.

Valuing happiness vs. prioritizing positivity

We wanted to find out what it was about making happiness a focal goal that backfires.

To gain a better understanding, we measured these two approaches to finding happiness: valuing happiness versus prioritizing positivity.

People who valued happiness agreed with statements such as "I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy" or "If I don't feel happy, maybe there is something wrong with me."

People who prioritized positivity agreed with statements such as "I structure my day to maximize my happiness" or "I look for and nurture my [positive emotions](#)."

We also included a measure of the extent to which people feel uncomfortable with their [negative emotional experiences](#). To do this, we asked for responses to statements like: "I see myself as failing in life when feeling depressed or anxious" or "I like myself less when I feel depressed or anxious."

People who expected to feel happy (scoring high on valuing happiness), also tended to see their negative emotional states as a sign of failure in life and lacked acceptance of these emotional experiences. This discomfort with [negative emotions](#) partly explained why they had lower levels of well-being.

On the other hand, people who pursued happiness indirectly (scoring high on prioritizing positivity), did not see their negative emotional states

this way. They were more accepting of low feelings and did not see them as a sign they were failing in life.

What this shows is when people believe they need to maintain high levels of positivity or happiness all the time to make their lives worthwhile, or to be valued by others, they react poorly to their negative emotions. They struggle with these feelings or try to avoid them, rather than accept them as a normal part of life.

Pursuing happiness indirectly does not lead to this same reaction. Feeling down or stressed is not inconsistent with finding happiness.

What makes positivity toxic?

So, it appears the key ingredient in toxic positivity is not positivity itself, after all. Rather, it is how a person's attitude to happiness leads them to respond to negative experiences in life.

The prospect of experiencing pain, failure, loss, or disappointment in life is unavoidable. There are times we are going to feel depressed, anxious, fearful, or lonely. This is a fact. What matters is how we respond to these experiences. Do we lean into them and accept them for what they are, or do we try to avoid and escape from them?

If we are aiming to be happy all the time then we might feel tough times are interrupting our goal. But if we simply put a priority on positivity, we are less concerned by these feelings—we see them as an ingredient in the good life and part of the overall journey.

Rather than always trying to "turn a frown upside down," we are more willing to sit with our low or uncomfortable emotions and understand that doing so will, in the long run, make us happy.

Learning to respond rather than react to these emotions is a key enabler of our [happiness](#).

Our reaction to discomfort is often to get away and to reduce the pain. This might mean we employ ineffective emotion regulation strategies such as avoiding or suppressing unpleasant feelings.

If we do, we fail to engage with the insights an unpleasant experiences bring. Responding well to these experiences means getting "discomfortable"—being comfortable with our discomfort. Then we can be willing to feel what we feel and get curious about why those feeling are there. Taking this response allows us to increase our understanding, see our choices, and make better decisions.

As the [saying](#) goes: "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional."

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How to avoid 'toxic positivity' and take the less direct route to happiness (2021, November 1) retrieved 14 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-11-toxic-positivity-route-happiness.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--