

Balanced Positivity: Acknowledging Challenges

"Stay positive." We've all heard this phrase at some point in our lives. Sometimes we say it to ourselves, or others may tell it to us. Positivity can push us to do things by giving us energy and motivation. However, the definition of positivity can vary from person to person. Do you think we can stay positive all the time? Maybe not all the time. We all think we should always stay positive like it's the right way to handle everything. This idea of being positive is something we've picked up from our experiences and in interaction with the Community/ society—it's something we're taught / learnt to keep up with.

Positivity is often celebrated as a key to our mental well-being, but what happens when it becomes toxic? **Toxic positivity** is when people ignore or push away negative feelings to focus only on being positive all the time. Ignoring genuine feelings of sadness or frustration can harm mental well-being. It's important to acknowledge what we feel and accept that constant positivity isn't possible. People react differently depending on the situation. Negative emotions are normal, we should recognize and handle our feelings instead of ignoring them.

A study published in the journal "Emotion" (2007) emphasized the importance that people need to show how they feel about their mental health. When people feel like they have to hide their true feelings, it can make them feel fake and cause them to struggle inside.

“Accepting our real emotions isn't being weak; it's a brave move that helps us be genuine and grow as individuals”. - Brené Brown

“Just think positive and everything will be fine”, this phrase is often used by many of us as it seems to be a harmless and great suggestion. When you first hear, it seems positive and ok to hide how they feel, worrying that showing any negative feelings may be perceived as weak or failing. The reality is, that just thinking positively might not fix what's causing the problem, we should recognise those feelings which help us to accept the challenges and work towards the solutions. Suggesting someone to "just think positive" can push them to confusion and increase their mental health problems, might also stop them from expressing their feelings, and problems and mainly from seeking professional help.

Research has found that trying to always seem positive and hide negative feelings can make people feel stressed out. A study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in 2001 showed that when people suppress their emotions, it makes their physical health more stressed and their mental health worse.

- o The effects of toxic positivity can cause **guilt**. People might think that if they are not able to find a way to feel positive, they consider themselves doing something wrong which leads to Guilt. Feeling guilty is complicated and it involves different channels of the brain that can bring lots of struggle.

Research has explored the connection between toxic positivity and mental health struggles. A study in the "Journal of Contextual Behavioural Science" (2019) discussed how the pressure to be positive at all times can contribute to feelings of shame and inadequacy, especially for individuals dealing with mental health challenges.

Even though we're still learning about how guilt works in the brain, scientists have found a few areas and ways it's connected. Let's see how it is working.

For example:

Imagine a person named Sita who is in a place where she always wants to project herself as happy and positive as she thinks that is what people will expect from her and then only she gets accepted. Usually, we tend to lean towards happy and cheerful people, as observed, everyone expects others to always be happy and positive, even when things are tough. Now, let's say Sita is feeling stressed and not so great because of the workload, but everyone around her suggests that she can be happy and cheerful like everything is perfect. People around Sita might want her to always be happy due to their cultural values, where sadness or vulnerability are seen as weaknesses.

Sita's brain, which is responsible for detecting conflicts, notices that Sita feels different inside compared to what she's showing outside (Her feelings and behaviour are different). This conflict makes Sita feel emotionally and mentally mixed up and drained. It's like her mind is saying, "You are supposed to be happy, but your feelings are different/not feeling the same inside." This conflict, plus the pressure of acting happy even when it's hard, can make Sita feel sad which might affect her mental well-being. It shows that what Sita truly feels, doesn't match

what she's expected to show because of toxic positivity rules. This is how the pressure to always maintain a positive outlook can impact mental health negatively.

In a workplace where being positive is really important. Workers notice that when their colleagues act cheerful and optimistic, even during tough times, they receive praise and rewards. This **observation** teaches employees that showing any negative feelings isn't appreciated. So, to be recognized and rewarded, people start acting happy all the time, even if they're facing challenges.

This pressure to always be positive can make employees hide their true emotions and cause stress. People also worry that they won't get praised or rewarded if they don't act positively. This makes them feel anxious and insecure because they're scared of being judged and negatively seen as not good enough if they show any negative emotions. When nobody can understand how they feel, it makes them feel even more stressed and lonely. Acting happy all the time also makes it tough for people to connect with their co-workers. It also affects how people communicate with each other in the workplace.

Always being positive, known as toxic positivity, can hurt mental health. It's important to know that it's okay to feel how they actually feel. Every emotion is important and has its own unique value. Trying to be overly positive with someone going through real challenges might not help them as much as we think. Just trying to make everything seem positive might not help them understand the actual situation and work towards it. By accepting and understanding our true/genuine feelings, we can create better environments where everyone feels supported.

“Real strength comes from dealing with our feelings directly, instead of pretending to be positive all the time”- Susan David

Kripa Das

Development Coach