



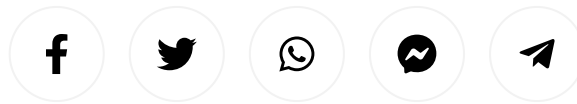
BEAUTY

# Good Vibes Only? Why toxic positivity is corrosive for your mental health

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Anyone in mental distress who's been told to 'cheer up' or 'get over it' knows the sting and isolation of toxic positivity. Here's why you're allowed to have your feelings



It's the well-meaning statements. The clever, memeable one-liners that proliferate Pinterest and impeccably curated Instagram feeds. *Positive vibes only. A negative mind will never give you a positive life. Great things never came from comfort zones.*

Newly retrenched? *Be grateful you're not homeless.* Cheated on? *Plenty of fish in the sea!* Miscarried your second child? *At least you already have a kid!*

Here's why hyper-positive statements that disregard someone's pain and process has a boomerang effect on their mental health.

Mathew Baker, co-founder of The Depression Project, describes toxic positivity as the, “inappropriate overgeneralisation of a happy or joyful state to situations that are inherently distressing and painful. For example, telling someone who just got a divorce to ‘cheer up’ or telling someone who’s had a loved one just pass away to ‘be positive’.”

Dr Francis Ngui, senior consultant psychiatrist of 25 years at Adam Road Medical Centre and Royal Square defines toxic positivity as, “being condescending and all-knowing, with a one-size fits all solution.”

‘Good’ mental health isn’t about never having dark thoughts or challenging seasons. Just as it’s unrealistic to be positive and happy 100 per cent of the time—it’s also unfair to hold others to the same impossible standard.

Toxic positivity instantly disconnects one soul to another. In a bid to encourage others to move on, grieve faster, get over it at our time and target, it shrouds those on the receiving end of this faux positivity in shame and isolation. If you’re slowly waking up to the fact that you’ve been dictating to others how they should feel when it comes to their own personal experiences, consider this your first step to being a better friend. And if you have that well-intentioned BFF, colleague or aunt who can’t help but guilt you into ‘bucking up’ when all you’re after is an empathetic ear, the good news is there are tools to have an open dialogue. So when does positivity turn toxic?

***Positivity curdles, “when we dismiss, reject or avoid negative events or emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety, or when we actively suppress our own feelings to ‘be positive’,” says clinical psychologist, Dr Annabelle Chow of Annabelle Psychology.***

Dr Jamie Lee, senior clinical psychologist at Adam Road Medical Centre, describes toxic positivity as an “overly positive bias that insists on having a positive mindset

despite a person's difficulties and emotional pain." She lists a number of ways we give and receive toxic positivity: when we chastise friends to look on the bright side, when we impose our views on not having negative feelings, or a "family culture that adopts a generally stoic response to adversity (e.g., 'don't dwell on the negative')."

## **Why toxic positivity is dangerous**

We know that words have the power to hurt or heal, but toxic positivity casually slaps a band-aid over genuine pain—trivialising raw heartbreak, overwhelming sadness, fear, failure, or disappointment. "Although the giver may have good intentions, it traumatises the recipient, due to the lack of empathy and feeling of being judged inferiorly," explains Dr Ngui.

As toxic positivity often comes from a place of "judgement and dismissiveness" instead of genuine compassion and understanding, "this doesn't help one with their mental health issue," says Baker, who is also a counsellor with a BSc (Psych), M. Couns. What these glib comments do, according to Baker, is makes one feel ashamed of their mental health, "invalidates their emotions, and makes them feel more misunderstood and alone."

"Common phrases such as 'your situation is a lot better than others' or 'it could be worse, look on the bright side of things' are dismissive of a person's thoughts and feelings, implying that their experience is insignificant," shares Dr Lee. "Emotions are a normal part of the human experience and play an important role in helping us make decisions, avoid danger, and to understand and gain understanding from others. Toxic positivity therefore makes it difficult for a person to develop good emotional regulation abilities, that is, the ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience. This then contributes to and maintains mental health conditions like anxiety disorders or clinical depression."

Being open and vulnerable about our suffering or concerns takes courage, says Dr Chow, who shares that responding to people in pain with 'good vibes only' is, "dismissive and invalidating of their pain or emotion, no matter how well-intended. It makes them feel 'wrong' for feeling the way they do, and might lead them to suppress

what they are going through. They might also learn to ignore the issues at hand and fail to address valid concerns which may snowball into bigger problems in the future.”

For former lawyer-turned-coach and founder of Bloom Coaching and Development, Pauline Howard, “When going through a challenging patch, feeling angry, sad or grieving, being showered with toxic positivity can enhance the painful emotions. Indeed, it can give the impression that the way we feel is not okay, that we are overreacting, wallowing or lacking willpower. Toxic positivity doesn’t necessarily arise from others but can also be self-inflicted when putting a lot of pressure on ourselves to ignore negative emotions and to get on with things. Both situations lead us to suppress our authentic emotions, withdraw when what we really need is support and in worst case scenarios enter a downward spiral.”

***Negative emotions aren’t necessarily a bad thing, according to Howard. “Negative emotions also have an important role to play, whether to be able to grieve properly, develop empathy or protect us from situations that are harming us.”***

“Suppressing those emotions does not make them go away, it just prevents us from dealing with them properly while letting them fester in some dark corner of our being, resulting in more accumulated stress in the long run,” says Howard.

## **How to be supportive presence without invalidating fears and feelings**

Instead of people pleasing or masking our emotions to keep the peace, being honest and showing up authentically, as we are, on days good and bad, gives space for people to let themselves be seen. “Being a positive force in helping someone with a mental health difficulty involves showing a willingness to listen with a non-judgemental stance, and a willingness to learn more about the person’s struggles,” says Dr Lee.

For Baker, the first step is to “listen empathetically so that you can understand exactly what they’re going through. This will lay the foundation that allows you to effectively attend to their needs, empower them, and work together towards more positive outcomes.”

Howard also recommends, “to show that we have understood what is going on by gently rephrasing and to use validating words which show real empathy and acknowledgment. It is important – and far less pressurising for the recipient—to remember that we do not need to “solve” everything, that it is not our issue but that the best we can do is to be there, to listen properly and to help where possible.”

“It can be tricky,” says Dr Ngui, who says that timing is also important. Confronted or addressed “too soon, and the raw wound will reopen. Often, being silent and not saying anything but just being present and close by is far more helpful than words.”

## **Common phrases to retire for good**

“‘Think positive’, ‘cheer up’, and ‘be happy’—while all of these things are ideal, they are overly simplistic when it comes to a mental health issue and provide no guidance on how to actually achieve this outcome,” says Baker.

For Dr Chow, “‘Always look on the bright side’, no matter the situation, encapsulates the essence of toxic positivity. It trivialises our instinctual and in fact, natural, thoughts and emotions that are negative, even if they are actual and legitimate concerns that give rise to those thoughts or emotions.”

## **Your emotional support script**

“As well-meaning as we may be, many of us are not trained in providing mental health support. We usually seek to ‘end’ the circumstances or situations that create the suffering and take a solution-focused approach,” says Dr Chow. “While a solution remains an important step in the process to eliminate or reduce the source of suffering, it is equally important to first support our family emotionally or loved one. Once he or she is in a better frame of mind, you can then discuss solutions together.”

Avoid awkward foot-in-mouth moments with Dr Chow's script:

*"Thanks for sharing with me, I know it must not be easy."*

*"It sounds like you're going through a lot, is there anything I can do?"*

*"Would you like to talk about what you're thinking or feeling right now."*

*"I really can't imagine what you're going through, but please know I'm here for you."*

Instead of assigning blame or accusing them of being dramatic, Baker recommends showing compassion and "lending a helping hand":

*"We'll get through this together."*

*"How can I support you during this time?"*

*"I'm proud of you for fighting through this."*

Dr Lee offers validating statements which can go a long way in supporting a loved one:

*"It's natural to be sad in a situation like this."*

*"I can see that this is very painful for you."*

*"While I may not completely understand, I want to be here to learn more and to help."*

*You are not alone. For mental health support in Singapore, visit the [Singapore Association for Mental Health](#). For mental health support in Malaysia, visit the [Malaysian Mental Health Association](#).*

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