

# Positive Vibes Only: The Downsides of a Toxic Cure-All

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“Always look on the bright side of life” sang Brian, as he was tied to a cross after being sentenced to death. The closing song of the movie *Life of Brian* went on to be a success. It was played at the closing ceremony of the 2012 Olympics, and was even listed as the most popular funeral song for Britons in 2014<sup>1</sup>. Monty Python’s original scene was a satirical comment on a message that many people still take to heart: always think positively. It’s a familiar notion that appears in the conversations we have with friends, in our inner dialogues, in comments from strangers. Utter joy is omnipresent on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest. It is an inescapable theme in the realm of self-help books and mental health support apps. It is the ‘after’ in before and after makeover TV shows that help you improve your life. Businesses sell happiness in the form of a wide array of self-care products, imploring us to treat ourselves. Lifestyle bloggers help us with a plethora of tips and inspiration. Gratitude journals and books of affirmations remind us to stop and smell the roses. Success coaches spread the word that people with a positive mindset are better colleagues, partners, friends, and parents. Motivational speakers explain that positivity is confident, healthy, and creative. Celebrities add that it is successful and attractive. Positivity is a mindset. It is affordable, accessible and empowering. It provides comfort and opportunities, meaning and hope. Positivity inspires, motivates, sells. It is comfortable, carefree, aesthetic, and fun.

Positivity is more than an attitude, it is a movement. Who wouldn’t want to take part in that? However, this seemingly universally agreeable nature is precisely why the positivity movement needs a critical reevaluation. I will be discussing the tunnel vision of this movement, exploring how and when its efforts towards a positive mindset turn sunshine and rainbows into toxic positivity.

## Before and After

The positivity movement tends to set utterly unrealistic expectations of limitless positivity and happiness. Not surprisingly, social media serves as one of the main stages for this non-stop positivity show. It’s understandable that social media users want to see positive content on their feeds and that content creators and influencers play into that by tailoring their posts. For many, that’s simply part of their job. This is not to say that all social media influencers deliberately mislead their followers. In fact, I would argue it is impossible to accurately represent your life through images and text on any social platform, even if you’d try. When given the possibility of editing, curation, and the construction of an online presence however, most people –both influencers and ‘regular’ users– will logically lean toward a more positive representation of themselves. As minor and reasonable as these micro-deceptions are, they add up to create a standard of overwhelming positivity

that distorts our perception of the people around us. While it’s healthy and important to pay attention to positive things, social media keeps up the illusion that there is such a thing as 24/7, never-ending happiness. Negativity and unhappiness are an anomaly compared to the sheer volume of positive content and this tunnel-vision creates impossible expectations of what people are supposed to feel like in their daily lives.

Some writers, gurus and influencers break this one sided narrative and reassure (Fig. 1) their following that it’s okay to feel sad, guilty or angry. However, a nuanced message like that doesn’t have much time to resonate when it’s drowned out by hundreds of posts showcasing overjoyed people and quotes like “stop standing in your own way”. These visually pleasing reassurances are also usually directly followed by a list of tips to reframe negative feelings and quickly move on.



(Fig. 1)<sup>2</sup>

'Negative' feelings are abnormalised because across the board, happiness is presented as an ideal standard and a defined, static state. A state one can be in, or worse: deviate from. Vanessa van Edwards writes: "Happiness is now the default— either you're happy or you're depressed."<sup>3</sup> On social media, users are urged to let go of their past, of anger, frustration and bitterness, feelings that are considered toxic and unnatural (Fig. 2). Self-help journal *Let that Sh\*t Go* for example, that is appropriately subtitled "A Journal for Leaving Your Bullsh\*t Behind and Creating a Happy Life," advocates the same method. In her immensely popular book *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, organising consultant Marie Kondo advises her readers to "intensely and completely" discard items in their home that don't meet her ultimate criterion: "Does it spark joy?"<sup>4</sup> While this seems somewhat suitable for material possessions, the advice to "let go" of things that "weigh you down" is also applied to more complex components of life, like relationships. To a certain extent this is understandable because at some point in life we all need to deal with difficult relationship decisions. However, some self-help authors focus so much on the production of positivity that they describe this process in very cold, misleadingly straightforward terms. Author and motivational speaker Tony Robbins for example, walks you through the process of letting go of "relationships that no longer serve you" in order to reach your goals and "unlock the life you deserve."<sup>5</sup>

Unhappiness and negativity aren't just considered abnormal; by borrowing terms from the medical world –psychology in particular– the positivity

movement is quick to label unhappiness and negativity as dysfunctional. Within the positivity movement, there's a crowd of 'DIY-psychologists' that discuss "preventive coping methods," "triggers," and "unhealthy habits." Such medical terms are mixed with spiritual expressions about "aligning with true power" and "energetic connection," resulting in a theatrical semi-psy-language. This language is used in a social context rather than a medical one, which pathologises the normalcy of our everyday lives (Ebben, 1995).



(Fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>

Toxic positivity considers non-stop positivity the norm, or at least a possibility, while completely rejecting all negativity. This suggests that anyone who doesn't adhere to this completely unrealistic norm is flawed and in need of transformation. In many self-help books like *Girl Wash Your Face* by Rachel Hollis, the journey towards a positive mindset is framed as a life-changing metamorphosis<sup>7</sup>. Like a makeover TV show, this mental makeover approach also clearly distinguishes a dispreferred 'before' and an elusive 'after'. However, instead of crooked teeth, unfavourable feelings and thoughts should be adjusted. People must let go, get over things, moods should be boosted and focuses should be shifted.

### Treat Yourself

For a movement that mainly revolves around a psychological objective, the positivity movement takes on a surprisingly material form. Its goal of full-time happiness slots seamlessly into the narrative of the self-help market. The business of selling happiness and mental makeovers has existed for years, al-

though it has gone through some rebranding. Rather than 'self-help', individual entrepreneurs and commercial companies now sell 'self-care', 'self-improvement' and 'personal development'. Positivity is sold like it's fast-fashion and self-care is quick and easy and, most importantly, ambiguous. 'Retail therapy' – pampering yourself through consumerism – is suggested to be the cure to a wide range of 'negative feelings' and an immense variety of products is sold in the name of self-care. Somehow, items like air purifiers, composts and poop stools now fall in the category of best-selling self-care items<sup>8</sup>. BuzzFeed's lists of little things that bring positivity in your life include positive affirmation candles, essential oils, socks, colouring books and even a mini solar system "to have the whole universe in your hands, reminding yourself that you alone are in charge of your own fate"<sup>9</sup>. Other brands seem to follow the idea that 'treating yourself' involves the purchase of more extravagant self-gifts, like luxury cosmetics or 24K gold detox 'ear seeds'<sup>10</sup>. Self-help gurus build their careers on the sale of books and motivational speeches. Subscription-based self-care kits like Therabox and Hopebox are popping up, promising a monthly fix of positivity. Gratitude journals and books of affirmations, to direct your attention toward the positive things in life, sell like hotcakes<sup>11</sup>. Thousands of social media influencers sell products through sponsored content, recommendations and ads. We seem to be surrounded by pride, gratitude, joy, inspiration and #goodvibes.

The ethics behind this consumerist approach to happiness are obviously dubious. The excessive consumption of self-development products doesn't revolutionise anything; it actually keeps us stuck in our place. This stagnation is then excused inside the vicious cycle of consumption. Memberships to westernised, sped-up versions of yoga classes and mindfulness courses are sold as a quick-fix for all kinds of mental health problems. However, this paradoxical phenomenon doesn't challenge the organisational structures responsible for mass-burn-outs and work-related stress whatsoever. Stores are filled with self-care beauty products targeting an audience that struggles with a lack of self-esteem. Buying these products might indeed provide a temporary sense of confidence and joy. In the end however, the beneficiaries from such purchases are the very companies that helped create the incredibly harmful beauty standards responsible for this lack of self-esteem.

Additionally, publishing statistics claim that 80% of self-help book customers are repeat buyers<sup>12</sup>. This could indicate that the act of buying self-help books in itself already makes people feel better. Likewise, the stories of motivational speakers and self-help experts provide an excellent opportunity to live vicariously through the success of others. Treating yourself to some self-development tools might be unexpectedly counterproductive, offering escapism rather than personal reflection.

### **The Relatability Show**

Rather than products, many authors, public speakers, and influencers are their own brand and sell their ideas and success stories. Some of these 'positivity gurus' share their daily routines, while others tell tales of radical transformation, describing how they overcame hardships and changed their lives by taking control of their mindsets. Their audience needs to believe that "they have been there, and they did it, so I can too."

Beauty and lifestyle vlogger Zoella, for example, told her viewers "Just think the same thing as me [...] if you just decide to say yes to the opportunities you are given then you will get more out of life."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, author, success coach, and self-proclaimed "motivational cattle prod" Jen Sincero announces on her website that "If my broke ass can get rich, you can too."<sup>14</sup> This literal approach might work for some, but the message will really hit home when the 'positivity guru' in question has an audience that relates to them. For many influencers in the positivity movement, relatability is an essential instrument to convince an audience to take their advice. Relatability is the link between "they did it" and "so I can too". Because they are relatable, these 'gurus' can use their own experiences to prove the effectiveness of their strategies. Relatability is a means to preserve their authority and legitimise their expertise as a psy-expert<sup>15</sup>.

One of the many methods to establish a relatable image is the generous use of swearwords and sarcasm. *Find your F\*cking Happy: A Journal to Pave the Way for Positive Sh\*t Ahead* by Monica Sweeney<sup>16</sup>, and Sarah Knight's *The Life-Changing Magic of Not Giving a F\*ck*<sup>17</sup> are two of many instances of this trend. By using blunt language, these authors present themselves as uniquely honest, straightforward, in other words: 'real'. It is also an attempt to shed the serious self-helpy-ness of self-help and

build a more accessible brand. Sarah Knight's book is a parody of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, perhaps in another effort to take distance from a conventional, 'serious' self-help practice.

A different method of this careful construction of 'realness' takes place on YouTube. Here, creators present their mental health struggles in videos with titles like "Anxiety Q&A" and "Opening Up About My Depression." I do not mean to say that the creators of videos like these do not experience anxiety or aren't genuinely trying to help viewers who share this experience. These videos also open up a valuable discussion about the underrepresentation of mental health issues. However these videos, that at this point form their own genre, have a strong performative element. Creators usually record themselves in a bedroom environment wearing casual clothes and little makeup. They tone down the editing and cinematic qualities, all to reinforce the sense of sincerity that is so useful for the YouTuber as a brand. In "#YouTuberAnxiety: Anxiety as Emotional Labour and Masquerade in Beauty Vlogs," Sophie Bishop (2018) aptly describes how anxiety videos "can be utilised to restore a vlogger's brand when it is in jeopardy, and to pathologise instances of so-called negativity. [...] The anxiety genre provides opportunities to reset, to reposition the beauty vlogger as a point of identification, and to remind her viewers 'I'm just like you.'"

In a similar vein, on Instagram and TikTok, famous celebrities, influencers and pop-culture icons that generally seem far removed from common life present themselves as 'normal' people. They post a curated selection of 'imperfections' to close the distance between themselves and their fans. Only the minor and aesthetically pleasing flaws make it to social media to be shared among other perfect imperfections.

For influencers and other positivity gurus that are working towards the growth of their audience, simultaneously keeping up a relatable image is quite the challenge. The endeavour to be universally relatable often results in large amounts of messages that are as vague as they are inspirational. Messages like "live your life fully" or "dance like nobody's watching," provide a general feeling of empowerment but refrain from making any clear statements. They rarely provide a specified analysis or concrete direction, leaving the reader with little more than a vague

sense of motivation. Social media influencers loudly express their gratitude for, and pride in, the readers of their posts. Sincerity, however, seems hard to find in the compliments from these relative strangers. Their motivational messages of praise are designed to appeal to anyone and everyone, meaning they lack personal specificity and thus remain ambiguous (Fig. 3).



(Fig. 3)<sup>18</sup>

### One Size Fits All

Using relatability as a marketing tool, self-help writers, motivational speakers, YouTubers, Instagram celebrities and others sell their experiences as strategies. There is no doubt that some of the achievements of these people can be accredited to their attitude. Many a time however, they are constructed as if chance or external factors played no part and as though the outcome was inevitable. Some of these 'positivity-gurus' seem to hang onto what could be described as a confirmation bias and attribute their success purely to the strength of positive thinking, assigning failure to a lack of will-power. There even seems to be a recurring idea that thoughts directly influence external life. Gabrielle Bernstein, author of *Super Attractor* and *The Universe Has Your Back* describes the practice of manifesting. According to her, to proactively co-create a new reality, she mentally aligned herself with the Universe and approaches the world as a vibrational reality rather than a physical space. She manifested loving relationships, her book, career support, even her child<sup>19</sup>. Gabrielle might be on the more spiritual end of the positivity spectrum, but she's not the only one who considers the mind an all-powerful force.

In fact, the general consensus of the positivity movement is that the individual is the master of their own life as the one and only certainty. The emphasis is always on the strength of the individual mind and is expressed in biographical books, blog posts, Pinterest images, mindfulness apps and social media comments. No matter what these sources offer, no matter what area of life they pertain to, or what audience they're addressing, the bottom line is always the same. The terribly standardised conclusion is that "choosing happiness" and "putting in the work" –in the form of the improvement of the individual attitude– is the one-size-fits-all solution to every problem. A solution that promises friendship over loneliness, wealth over financial struggle, happiness over misery, and success over failure. In the words of Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2017) "according to the ideology of personal development you are the panacea [...] You can solve all your problems. You need to focus more on yourself. You need to operationalise, to know what your skills, abilities, beliefs are. You have to know yourself first; hence, you can use yourself to fix yourself."

The propagation of this overly simplified method has many downsides, some of which become painfully apparent in instances involving the body positivity movement. Clearly, work needs to be done when it comes to society's acceptance, if not celebration, of all body types, regardless of age, race, size, gender or ability. It is important to create a conversation around the mental wellbeing of people who suffer from society's impossible beauty standards. However, the standards themselves and the cultures that produce them aren't always part of the body positivity discussion. The tendency is to revert back to the standardised method of the positivity movement: obsessing over the individual. Consequently, body positivity is often exclusively talked about in terms of self-esteem. For the body positivity movement this means that at times, sadly, their practices actually mirror the very standards they try to contend with.

A paparazzo's photo of singer-songwriter Billie Eilish gave hundreds of people the idea that they could suddenly pick apart the body of an eighteen-year-old woman, but the photo also triggered a stream of compliments.<sup>20</sup> She was praised for her bravery and considered courageous as her body was considered 'atypical' for a celebrity. Recalling the compliments

she received about her body, singer and rapper Lizzo told an interviewer: "When people look at my body and be like, 'O my God, she's so brave,' it's like, 'No, I'm not, I'm just fine. I'm just me. I'm just sexy. If you saw Anne Hathaway in a bikini on a billboard, you wouldn't call her brave.'"<sup>21</sup> If women are considered brave merely for being at all confident in a body that looks any other way than thin, white, and able, then there is a presumption that there's something shameful about their bodies that must be overcome. These responses also ignore the fact that current beauty standards are so incredibly narrow that falling outside of them is practically inevitable. They are –hopefully unintentionally– backhanded compliments that conform to the very standards they attempt to protest.

### **Confidence Culture**

Confidence is presented as a great method to solve all kinds of body image issues. In fact, anytime the positivity movement specifically addresses women, it is the main –if not only– point of discussion. Marketing campaigns, self-development courses and even children's books share this obsession with the development of self-esteem in girls and women. According to them, the mission is confidence and the method is to gracefully let go of negativity, control, rules, and expectations. This focus on self-esteem might be a genuine attempt to alleviate the pressure of societal expectations on women, but paradoxically creates its own unattainable ideals.

Family vloggers and authors of 'mommy-blogs' urge women to be their authentic selves and to refuse the role of the 'perfect parent'. The stress about the expectations surrounding perfect motherhood is written off to women's inability to 'let go'. Books like *Nice Girls Don't Get The Corner Office*<sup>22</sup>, *Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman*<sup>23</sup> and *The Confidence Code*<sup>24</sup> tell women to be confident and unapologetic, or they will never be able to make it in a corporate man's world. Other sources of advice, from podcasts to Facebook communities, are catered to –mainly heterosexual– women in search of a romantic relationship. Again, women are spurred on to ignore what others think of them and direct their attention to their own self-love. Women have to love themselves before anyone, let alone a man, could ever love them. The importance of confidence is underscored time and time again. The entire positivity movement seems to agree that in order to be a good parent and partner, to be successful at work, and to

be healthy and happy, all a woman really needs is confidence.

Once again, the positivity movement hyper focuses on individual development and disregards bigger external issues. This is exactly what Gill and Orgad describe in their analysis of confidence culture. “The brutal effects of patriarchal capitalism are dismissed as trivial compared to women’s own toxic baggage – which, bizarrely, is treated as self-generated and entirely unconnected to a culture of normalised pathologisation, blame, and hate speech directed at women”. The intense focus on the development of a positive self-image in women demonstrates another recurring theme of toxic positivity: the demand for transformation, a logical consequence of the positivity movement’s black and white perspective. Gill and Orgad also highlight this: “If confidence is the new sexy, then insecurity (in women) is undoubtedly the new ugly. Self-doubt and lack of confidence are presented as toxic states. This is deeply classed and points to the ‘other’ of confidence culture, showing not only what it celebrates but also what it abjects.”

### **A Blind Eye**

The consistent pressure on individual development reveals an unwritten expectation: it’s our duty to be happy. A successful person and good citizen works towards happiness and positivity in the same way they might work toward their career: in a constructive, efficient and productive way. The collaboration between mindfulness app Calm and transport company Uber demonstrates this with their “speedy but relaxing” version of meditation on-the-go, offering guided meditation exercises that fit perfectly within or in between trips<sup>25</sup>. Economic language like “invest in yourself,” “your energy is currency,” “you are the CEO of your life,” has even found its way into the world of personal development. Reconstructing our mindsets towards happiness is another box to tick on a daily to-do list, an errand to run between meetings and grocery shopping.

While the fixation on the efficient development of the individual does give off a sense of empowerment and agency, it is also isolating. Each person is responsible for their own life. Toxic positivity claims that your mindset is everything. Your attitude is the strongest motor for change, the only one in fact, meaning there is one main character in the journey towards positivity and it is you. In *I am Worthy, I Want and I Can*, Elena Trifan (2016) describes how

the theory of personal development prioritises self-centeredness and proposes to eliminate the concern for others and society in general. Within the positivity movement there is little recognition that change occurs within a social structure and that obstacles to change are embedded here. The mind is considered the sole key to happiness and success and it is implied that every person –no matter their personal circumstances– has the tools needed to reconstruct their life to find happiness. Lifestyle blogger Louise Pentland, for example, told her viewers “You’ve got the same opportunities as I have, just get going with it.”<sup>26</sup> An abundance of inspirational quotes like, “you can light up your own damn life” and “whatever you’re not changing, you’re choosing,” reinforce this idea. The thought that everyone has power over their own thoughts, therefore decisions and therefore experiences in life is naive at best and ignorant at worst. As Trifan writes: “This type of thinking does not recognise any form of discrimination, unequal access to resources, or the reproduction of classes.”

The positivity movement assigns the opportunity for change only to the individual, as well as full accountability for the existence of a plethora of societal problems. The behaviour of individual people is problematised and negativity is their ‘dysfunction’, so they are held accountable for problems and solutions in many different areas of life. “The ideal self in self-help literature is therefore a self-focused, highly individualised subject who works on themselves—often at the exclusion of the social. [...] Self-help works to construct thoughts and feelings as modifiable, but the wider world as fixed and unchangeable.” (Anderson, 2017) On lifestyle blog Goop, for example, when confronted with mistreatment and incivility at work, readers are advised to “bet on yourself, not on your ability to change the offender or the organisation.”<sup>27</sup> Readers are motivated to be self-sufficient and solve their own problems without relying on anyone else. This small example represents a general, misplaced, extreme individual accountability that completely obscures larger social and institutional structural culpability. Social, economic and political organisations are barely critiqued or questioned, let alone challenged. They are excused while problems of unemployment, exploitation, abuse, discrimination based on age, race, sex, gender, disability, are constructed as individual and psychological. Because toxic positivity decontextualises these issues of structural inequality, it

contributes little to fundamental structural reform. It redirects the obligation to change, which doesn't only leave structural problems unchallenged, but at times even reinforces them. The advice that is given by self-help writers and happiness-Instagrammers often involves small fixes, minor adjustments focused on individual everyday behaviour within –not against– the system<sup>28</sup>. The positivity movement's version of change is non-threatening as it concerns the adaptation to society, rather than the disruption of it.

## Conclusion

There are clear benefits to a generous amount of positivity in life and the desire for a positive attitude is completely understandable. Endlessly dwelling on hopelessness and negativity is useless and there are definitely times where a conscious injection of positivity helps balance things out. However, the practices of the positivity movement tip the scales dramatically to one side. This is a side that is seemingly ideal but upon closer inspection, proves to be another harmful extreme: toxic positivity. The movement proposes an unattainable objective, while abnormalising and policing all negative thoughts. 'Helping' individuals to work on their flawed selves is an entire community of influencers and busi-

nesspeople that give narrow-minded advice to wide audiences. Their exceedingly oversimplified solutions show a problematic disregard for the personal circumstances of their audience members. I am sure that many of these writers, motivational speakers, social media influencers, and other figures affiliated with the positivity movement genuinely mean well. But by acknowledging their own subjectivity, rather than universalising their own experiences, they could direct their good intentions away from toxic positivity. This would also relieve some of the pressure on individual personal development. However, adding to this pressure are also the corporate companies that abuse the concept of self-care to boost their sales. Toxic positivity maintains the current state of consumerism; it counteracts the demand for change by creating uncomplaining subjects. Sadly, this is not the only way the positivity movement mirrors destructive conventions and reinforces the status quo. The movement has a bad habit of decontextualisation, locating the problem –as well as the solution– inside the individual. Toxic positivity misplaces the accountability for institutional problems, which therefore remain unchanged and even excused. In the end, it seems like the positivity movement is the one that could use a mental makeover.

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