

I was nearing the end of a frantic day when the email landed in my inbox. It was about to get chewed up with the rest in my 6pm delete-spree when my hand stopped millimetres from the keyboard. Something in the subject line caught my eye. "Tips for staying positive during lockdown," it read.

It was just as newly announced lockdown measures meant I couldn't see my family that weekend, and just as a news alert on my phone told me we'd reached the highest number of COVID cases in a single day since the outbreak began. But, you know, PMA and all that.

Positivity has found itself in a place of omnipotence in 21st-century thinking. Every scroll through social media is met with #PositiveVibes, or a motivational quote etched in pastel calligraphy and flanked by peonies. The shops are full of manuals to help us "get over" our struggles and clothes adorned with clichéd slogans about #goals. But

when depression, anxiety and negative thinking threaten to swallow us whole, how helpful is the pressure to stay positive? Have we guzzled up so many #PositiveVibes that we're now greedily choking to death on factory-farmed happiness? And if so, at what cost?

For years, Amelia woke up to the same thing every morning: "perfect" women in grey marl joggers with bright white teeth touting the "happy life" on every screen she looked at. It was the kind of life Amelia wanted to live. So she began emulating them, starting every day with meditation, writing in

her gratitude journal and heading to the gym, all before getting ready for work at 7.30am. She told friends she couldn't go for drinks because it would interrupt the routine, and she bought all the books. She immersed herself in this world completely.

"I began engaging with this type of content about four years ago when I first moved to New Zealand from the UK. Living away from home meant that I was often really lonely and down. But I felt bad for feeling this way; I'd made the decision to be here in this beautiful place. I should have been happy and grateful. I followed a lot of influencers whose content focused on

happiness and mental wellbeing, and it spiralled from there. The people running these accounts were always there for me to absorb myself in. I thought it was a good way to spend my time."

Two years later, however, Amelia realised that all this positivity had begun to work against her. "I was holding myself to unsustainable standards and wearing myself out trying to do all these things Insta influencers were doing to 'live their best lives'. I was burning bridges with those around me by being antisocial. In 2018 I just said 'F*ck it! I wanted to find balance and connect to those around me. I still do the things I enjoy for my health, but not to extremes."

She didn't know it at the time, but what Amelia was grappling with is something called toxic positivity. It's a term used by psychologists to explain how a person's behaviour can be so committed to seeing the good that they don't pay proper attention to processing the bad. To



a degree, it can be a denial – a true belief in mind over matter. Sound familiar? Like most of us, you've probably followed Instagram accounts that exclusively post motivational quotes. I'd also hazard a guess that you've owned at least one gratitude journal, happiness diary or positivity planner. You bought in. But on a grey and sombre day, when you're feeling exhausted by the state of the world, anxious about work (or the lack thereof), or just down for no reason, does scrolling through a slew of posts urging you to "see the bright side" make you feel better? Or are you left feeling guilty for having a bad day, wishing you could simply "snap out of it" like everyone else seems to?

Feelings like this were brought into sharp focus in the wake of the global BLM movement in 2020. Faced with a barrage of trauma – both past and present, both online and in real life – many Black people spoke out about the difficulty of feeling like they had to find some sort of silver lining, some positive outcome, from the suffering they encountered. The human instinct to "look on the bright side" can be a powerful tool for good. But, sometimes, it can also act to nullify the experience the person at the centre of the difficulty is feeling. Sometimes saying, "Yes, this situation is terrible," might be the most affirmative thing that you can do.

The positive pound

So why has toxic positivity spread with such fervour? As conversations about mental health became more mainstream, and as the world faced more and more challenges, people understandably sought coping strategies. As that demand snowballed, and difficult conversations about mental health and wellbeing were left withering in the algorithm sale bin, while shareable, dopamine-driving posts about overcoming these challenges gained greater traction. In a bid to fill our lives with light, we stopped acknowledging the dark. To detrimental effect.

So what happens when you've built a career on positivity? Like so many other influencers, Alice – who runs mother-and-baby Instagram account Mama And Pea – has found the demands of it exhausting. "I initially had an interiors account, which is where my following started to grow. I changed it to a 'mummy style' account about two years ago when I fell pregnant, and it quickly became apparent that the space is all about an almost competitive level of positivity. You get sucked in because it feels good when you get a lot of likes."

"I used to spend ages rewriting positive and empowering captions, and I noticed that I started to feel very anxious. I was posting stuff for the wrong reason." Alice found the demands of the space so taxing that,

earlier this year, she was forced to step away from the job. These days she only posts once a week.

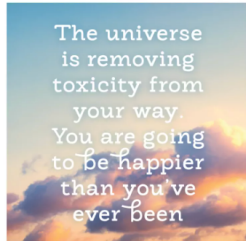
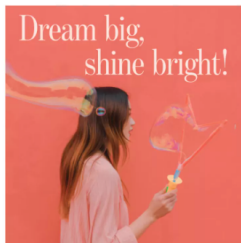
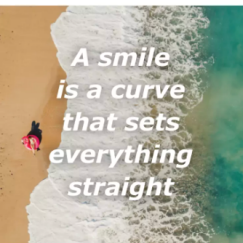
"Now I often feel overwhelmed by all the positive content on social media," she tells me. "The last thing I want to do is put on a fake happy face when I'm having a tough time." It's not just what you post either. To stay "in", Alice says you also have to comment positively all over everyone else's content as well. "It's tough – you feel like you can't relate to people because the positivity and happy vibes others expect from you means that you almost feel like a character."

Alice, like many others, feels under pressure to maintain this persona, as though positivity and unadulterated happiness is so inherently part of social media that one cannot participate without them.

This is an attitude that wellness influencer Fatima Banister has also struggled with. In her twenties she suffered a miscarriage, and while she needed to feel the pain that came along with her grief, an acquaintance instead told her to be thankful. "They said, 'At least you miscarried in your first trimester. You should be glad it wasn't later on in the pregnancy, and you can always get pregnant again.' I felt like what I had gone through didn't matter, that my feelings weren't valid, and at that moment I just wanted to be heard. That was a turning point for me."



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"I used to think that only focusing on the positive was the right thing to do. That I have been given this gift of life – how dare I feel angry, sad or depressed about something. Now I think differently. I think positivity is great, but I also hold space for everything I could encounter in life, and some of it isn't positive."

Mental health expert and psychotherapist Miyume McKinley knows all too well that humanity is far more complex than it often thinks itself. "This idea of being happy all the time, or of happiness as the ultimate goal, is portraying an idea of perfectionism and, as we all know, there is no such thing," she says. "The reality [is] that having vulnerable, unwanted feelings is a part of life, and that feeling sad, angry or jealous is part of being human."

Happy traits

The movement found me on a dreary Tuesday morning in my early twenties. I was a few months into taking antidepressants,

and learning that the brain is far more nuanced than you grow up believing, when something stopped me dead in my tracks. I was scrolling through Instagram when I came across a post telling me to "Choose happy." There it was, in black-and-white italicised Verdana, the confirmation my clouded brain had been looking for all that time: my depression was a choice. I was paralysed with anxiety and crushed by misery because of something I had done; because I wasn't working hard enough not to be.

In that moment, I decided that my mind was a project I was going to fix once and for all. I bought a happiness planner. The planner told me I was going on a "journey" to "achieving my goals" and living a different sort of life. It was that promise of a conclusion that had me marching up to the till without even checking the price tag. Words like "journey," "healing" and "achieving" make us believe that if you follow all the

steps, do all the work and tick all the boxes then you'll crack it and get to the happy place everyone else seems to be at. There is a finality to it that suggests all our problems can actually be solved – and for just £12.99.

"There is certainly a toxic undercurrent to all of this," says Rebecca Sparkes, a London-based psychotherapist. "I'm absolutely in no way anti social media, what I'm anti is accounts that pump out posts that stray into mental health. Wellness and mental health can get very conflated and these kinds of accounts can suggest that the antidote to depression or any life difficulties is to simply be more positive. If it were that simple, I'd be out of a job."

"Anyone who is struggling with their mental health

then simply feels doubly hopeless, helpless and guilty. They're being given an oversimplified panacea – you know, just write a gratitude list and you'll be good!"

This is not to say that these kinds of materials are never helpful, only that they can often overpromise and advertise happiness as a

purchasable state. Research has already found that gratitude is good for us – according to Harvard Health Publishing, it helps us to "relish good experiences, improve health, deal with adversity and build strong relationships". But these benefits are only valuable if we're willing to deal with the bad things that also exist.

Buying into these books and journals because I thought they would "fix" me was a fast-track ticket to failure and self-blame. But now, years later, I occasionally dip back in. I see them for what they are: tools of maintenance, or gyms for the brain – that way you're not signing up to be disappointed. "I [keep] a gratitude journal," Amelia says. "But I don't force myself to do it every day... some weeks I'll do it for a few days, then other weeks I won't at all. I don't expect it to be life-changing, but I think it helps me to be more present in the day."

We're talking about our mental health now more than ever before, but how exactly are we talking about it? Often, it's with the language of recovery; a retrospective from a sunnier place. When we buy into unrelenting positivity, it is because we're too afraid to confront negativity head on?

"I've tried posting honestly when I've had a bad day," Alice tells me. "But you're inundated with the sort of comments that make you feel like you shouldn't have been honest, and now everyone

thinks you're really struggling because you didn't put out something uber-positive."

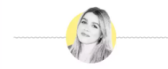
A bad attitude

It turns out that, as human beings, we just don't like constant positivity. It's like the over-earnest nice friend you have who you just wish would say something bad about someone for once. That's why Dr Natalie Dattilo – a clinical health psychologist at Brigham And Women's Hospital, in Boston – said toxic positivity is akin to "trying to shove ice cream into somebody's face when they don't feel like having ice cream". It's also why a study published in *The Journal Of Neuroscience* found that people who describe themselves as positive are more likely to suffer from optimism bias, meaning that they believe bad things are less likely to happen to them than others around them, in turn making them less discerning and cautious in decision-making.

If, like me, you've been told you're being "negative" at some point in your life, you'll know that the label cuts through the remainder of your personality like a knife through butter. I've had it thrown at me numerous times during arguments and I always respond defensively, vociferously explaining why, actually, I'm a very positive person, spitting with rage over every consonant. It could have been sandwiched between

a slew of compliments, but it'll have been the only word I heard. Instinctively I'd fight against the affront, slashing recklessly at the words as they fell through the air. But why? Having the capacity to appreciate the shade along with the light should be a good thing – it shows balance. A willingness to acknowledge the sum of the parts, not just the whole.

As human beings we're easily led into thinking in very black and white terms. Facts are reassuring. Life is complicated and we want to simplify it, so if popular culture tells us that positivity is good and negativity is bad, we have a binary that helps us function. But unadulterated positivity isn't something to aim for. We have to acknowledge that bad things happen and confront them when they do. Rather than aiming for one thing entirely, we should embrace the fact that life is like Louis Walsh's dream X Factor contestant in 2007: "the whole package" ♦



BEHIND THE SCENES
Daniella Scott

"I found the idea of writing this feature daunting. It often seems like people who say anything negative about positivity get slated on Twitter and, frankly, my wi-fi hasn't got the strength. But I realised that being worried about saying something showed what a terrifying beast toxic positivity had become. And if I felt this way, others might too."

GET THE balance RIGHT
Accounts that find the good stuff but don't sugar-coat it

- Carissa Potter Carlson (@pottercarlson)
- SOPHIE JOAN SHORT (@sophie.joan.short)
- Janea Brown (@janeabrown)