

# What's wrong with positive thinking?



Source: Alexas\_Fotos/Pixabay

Positivity is a booming industry. Thousands of books, countless blogs and news stories, untold quantities of internet memes, and quite a bit of legitimate science sing the praises of happiness and positive thinking. This sentiment is not new, of course. Its roots precede the modern era, appearing in some form in the writings of Aristotle; the 1950s saw the publication of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's bestselling book on the topic, *The Power of Positive Thinking*; and Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* attributed magical powers to positive thinking in the mid-2000s.

Chasing happiness can be like chasing an elusive ghost, and some say they know how to obtain it through positive thinking.

There's nothing wrong *per se* with thinking positively. Rather, indiscriminate positive thinking gives us pause, such as focusing only on silver linings when your outer coat is in tatters.

No one, at least no one I've known — and I suspect no one with whom you're acquainted — goes through life unscathed. Life has its ups and downs, and refusing to acknowledge personal loss, disappointment, frustration, resentment, and tears by focusing only on the positives is just as irrational as focusing only on the negatives. As a cognitive behavioral therapist, my focus is to help people process negative events and emotions, not bury them or turn a blind eye to them. My goal is to help people come to terms with the vicissitudes of life and move on, not getting stuck in habits of negative thinking or mental traps, such as misplaced blame, catastrophizing, pinning nasty labels on oneself, or becoming resigned to expecting only negative outcomes.

Focusing only on the positives is like going through life with a silly grin on your face. Rather than turning away from negative emotions, we can learn from them by treating them as bodily signals that deserve our attention. Anger signals that we perceive we have

been treated unfairly, anxiety signals that a threat is imminent, and so on. By tuning into the emotion, we can learn its signaling value and use it as a cue to action.

## Is CBT just positive thinking?

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) helps people rethink negative thoughts and challenge negative beliefs. But it doesn't preach that we should just discard reality in favor of thinking positive thoughts all the time. Unless your thoughts match up with your life experiences, they will seem hollow and forced.

When bad things happen, we need to recognize and process them, not simply gloss over them in the face of a grimmer reality. If you lose someone close to you, it's reasonable to experience a profound sense of loss. If you lose a bundle in the stock market, it's understandable to be upset, perhaps even upset with yourself for making some uninformed investment decisions. These situations involve genuine emotions that are proportional to the situation at hand. Jumping for joy when true disappointment occurs is a form of denial, not rational thinking.

## What about self-affirmations? Don't they work?

Occasional affirmations have a role to play in motivating us, as when a young man I was treating prepared for a stressful situation by looking at himself in the bathroom mirror and saying out loud, "I've got this." But spending your day repeating simple affirmations ("I love myself... Life is good... You're doing great") may not mirror reality, becoming as much of a distortion as exaggerating negative or disappointing events. When spouting affirmations becomes a daily mantra, it begins to sound hollow.

Life can be good, yes, and even in times of trouble, there is much for which we can be thankful, even just for drawing breath. But life experiences can also be frustrating, disappointing, annoying, and upsetting. In CBT, patients are encouraged to step back and take a closer look at their life situation and judge it for what it is. When bad things happen, it is reasonable to be upset, but it is not reasonable to feel hopeless or helpless. As the *Star Trek* character Mr. Spock famously said in an early episode, "*There are always*



*alternatives.*” Indeed, the sun will still come up in the morning (though in some parts of the Pacific Northwest, you might not know it), and the electric bill will still come on time.

## Putting on a happy face

There is scientific thinking behind putting on a happy face. When we engage facial muscles involved in smiling, it can trigger associated emotional reactions. It’s called the *facial feedback hypothesis*, and it posits that mimicking emotional expressions can activate related emotional states. So, a frown may bring us down, but a smile may give us a lift.

But a forced smile (called a *Duchenne smile*) is not genuine. Observers are quick to recognize when a person’s smile is genuine or forced. The telltale signs are fairly obvious to observers. As such, I’m not suggesting you walk around with a plastered smile on your face, but you may want to practice smiling in your private moments to see what associations it might call to mind, perhaps happier memories that can lift your mood at least temporarily.

The best way is to acknowledge that there are no simple answers to the complex problems people face — especially the all-encompassing and ongoing pursuit of happiness.



Jeffrey S. Nevid, Ph.D.,  
ABPP

Source: Adapted from

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-minute-therapist/202309/whats-wrong-with-positive-thinking>

<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/downsides-positivity>

Replace the words in bold with the correct vocabulary from the list on the next page.

1. He kept **talking a lot, often meaninglessly**, about success.
2. The story was a **twisted version of reality**.
3. Even in tough situations, she tried to find the **bright side**.
4. The danger is **about to happen very soon**.
5. Negative comments can **make someone feel sad**.
6. He devoted his life to the **act of trying to achieve** happiness.
7. She felt **nervous and worried** before giving the speech.
8. After a rough week, his **coat was completely ruined**.
9. His responsibilities were **total and all-inclusive**.
10. People shouldn't **attach negative labels** to others too quickly.
11. Her reaction was **real and sincere**, not fake.
12. Life is full of **changes, especially unpleasant ones, that happen in your life**.
13. The manager tried to **ignore or avoid the serious problem**.
14. I don't really know him; I'm only **slightly familiar with him**.
15. She escaped the accident **without any harm**.
16. Compliments from friends can **make someone feel happier**.
17. His apology felt **empty and meaningless**.
18. He felt **anger and bitterness** after being treated unfairly.
19. The feeling of relief lasted **for a short time**.
20. The **obvious clues** showed that she was lying.
21. I'm **supporting** the new plan instead of the old one.

## The list of words/phrases from the article

silver lining	outer coat is in tatters	be acquainted
unscathed	resentment	vicissitudes
pin labels on someone	anxiety	imminent
in favor of	hollow	gloss over
genuine	distortion	spouting
bring someone down	give someone a lift	telltale signs
temporarily	all-encompassing	pursuit of

## 2. Complete the key points with your own ideas.

- Life has its ups and downs, and people need to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- Positive thinking can be inspiring, but \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- Individuals can learn from negative emotions rather than \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

## 3. Discuss the following questions with your partner.

1. When was the last time someone told you to “cheer up” or “look on the bright side”? How did that make you feel?
2. How would you define a positive person? Does a happy and an optimistic person mean the same? What's similar/different?
3. Is positive thinking always helpful? When can it be harmful?
4. Is positive thinking good or bad for your love life/friendship? For kids?
5. Have you ever learned something valuable from a failure or disappointment?
6. Do you find it easy or difficult to show negative emotions in front of others? Why?
7. Can ignoring negative feelings ever be useful (e.g., in emergencies)?
8. Do you think people in your country are generally optimistic or pessimistic? Why?
9. What is toxic positivity?
10. Imagine you just had an interview for your dream job. Which feels better: assuming the best, that you nailed the interview and will be getting an offer any minute, or assuming the worst?





## **You'll Never Walk Alone**

**Music by Richard Rodgers | Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II for the musical  
"Carousel" (1945)**

When you walk through the storm  
Hold your head up high  
And don't be afraid of the dark  
At the end of the storm  
There's a golden sky  
And the sweet silver song of the lark.

Walk on, through the wind  
Walk on, through the rain  
Though your dreams be tossed and blown  
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart  
And you'll never walk alone  
You'll never walk alone.

Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart  
And you'll never walk alone  
You'll never walk alone.