

The Opposite of Toxic Positivity

August 25, 2021

Countless books have been written on the “power of gratitude” and the importance of counting your blessings, but that sentiment may feel like cold comfort during the coronavirus pandemic, when blessings have often seemed scant. Refusing to look at life’s darkness and avoiding uncomfortable experiences can be [detrimental to mental health](#). This “[toxic positivity](#)” is ultimately a denial of reality. Telling someone to “stay positive” in the middle of a global crisis is missing out on an opportunity for growth, not to mention likely to backfire and only make them feel worse. As the gratitude researcher Robert Emmons of UC Davis [writes](#), “To deny that life has its share of disappointments, frustrations, losses, hurts, setbacks, and sadness would be unrealistic and untenable. Life is suffering. No amount of positive thinking exercises will change this truth.”

The antidote to toxic positivity is “[tragic optimism](#),” a phrase coined by the existential-humanistic psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. Tragic optimism involves the search for meaning amid the inevitable tragedies of human existence, something far more practical and realistic during these trying times. Researchers who study “[post-traumatic growth](#)” have found that people can grow in many ways from difficult times—including having a greater appreciation of one’s life and relationships, as well as increased compassion, altruism, purpose, utilization of personal strengths, spiritual development, and creativity. Importantly, it’s not the traumatic event *itself* that leads to growth (no one is thankful for COVID-19), but rather [how the event is processed](#), the changes in worldview that result from the event, and the active search for meaning that people undertake during and after it.

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