The downsides of positivity

Kate Sweeny provides a nuanced picture of the research

It has many benefits, but could the power of positivity be on the wane?

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.

In fact, it appears that positivity's stock may be past its prime. The stack of books questioning the value of positivity (among them, Barbara Ehrenreich's Bright-sided, Gabriele Oettingen's Rethinking Positive Thinking, and Todd Kashden and Robert Biswas-Diener's The Upside of Your Dark Side) is beginning to rival the stack touting the benefits of happiness and positive thinking. Might positivity have a downside?

A stronger-than-straw man
Before I make the case against positivity as panacea, let me be clear: Positivity has many benefits, well-supported by solid research. Work by Barbara Fredrickson and her colleagues shows that positive emotions can bring out the best in us, making us more creative, open-minded, resilient, and connected to others. Happy people tend on average to be healthier, more physically active, more successful, more productive and more generous. They have more satisfying romantic relationships, more meaningful conversations and better friends. They may even live longer.

One particular type of positivity, the tendency to be optimistic about the future, also has myriad benefits. Optimists enjoy many of the same benefits as happy people (better health, better relationships, greater success, longer lives) – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that optimists also tend to be happier. Even adopting an optimistic outlook temporarily can be beneficial, particularly when it comes to motivation. Recent work by Elizabeth Tenney and her colleagues found that people who were more optimistic about their performance on an upcoming task tended to be more persistent when the task proved challenging. Work I did several years ago in collaboration with Zlatan Krizan found that people who maintained optimism about the likelihood that a favoured ballot measure would pass (despite evidence to the contrary, in this case) were more likely to report that they showed up at the polls to cast their vote on election day. More importantly, some evidence suggests that forgoing optimism and adopting a mindset of resignation can be deadly. A study of gay men with AIDS in the mid-1990s found that men who responded to their disease with a coping strategy referred to as realistic acceptance survived about half as long (nine months on average, compared to 18 months) as men who maintained a more positive outlook.

Given the possibly life-saving benefits of positivity, one might reasonably wonder about the value of an article arguing against it. However, ironically, the news about positivity is not all good. When deployed at the wrong time or in the wrong amount, positivity has clear downsides for preparation, prevention, relationships, and even mental health.
Unprepared for hard times
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? Most people would choose confident optimism over quivering doubt. In fact, optimism can be a great choice in the short-run, but timing is everything. Research on a phenomenon called 

*bracing for the worst* finds that as people approach the moment of truth – a moment when their hopes may be dashed and their greatest fears realised – people typically turn away from optimism and into the cold yet reassuring embrace of worst-case thinking in an effort to prepare themselves for bad news.

In a seminal study, James Shepperd and his colleagues tracked college students’ expectations about their performance on a midterm exam from the start of the semester, to the day after the exam, to moments before they learned their grade. Most students began the semester as cheery optimists, predicting a grade much higher than the one they would ultimately receive. However, as the moment of truth grew near, these optimists morphed first into stark realists and ultimately into dire pessimists, with their final predictions underestimating their true performance.

This phenomenon has been replicated dozens of times in predictions about health outcomes, starting salaries, performance on the bar exam – even predictions about whether people think you are hot (or not). Recent research from my lab shows that even people who are dyed-in-the-wool optimists become increasingly pessimistic as they approach the moment of truth.

This pervasive and robust tendency to brace for the worst than we expected. Put simply, bad news is a bummer, but unanticipated bad news is a special kind of bummer – which makes pessimism look like an appealing option when news is forthcoming. Numerous studies support the wisdom of lowering one’s expectations in anticipation of news. For example, the study mentioned earlier about optimism regarding an election outcome found that people who relinquished their optimism as they approached election day were less disappointed when the ballot measure failed to pass. Similarly, James Shepperd and I conducted a study of students predicting their midterm exam grade, similar to his original study, and found that students who underestimated their grade on the exam in the final moments before facing the music felt better than students who overshot in their prediction.

More recent research reveals that even being a worry-wart can pay off when it comes to preparing for news. A recent paper from my lab reports the experiences of law graduates awaiting their outcome on the California bar exam. Many participants were plagued with worry and struggled to regulate their distress as they waited for this potentially life-changing news. For example, the study mentioned earlier about optimism regarding an election outcome found that people who relinquished their optimism as they approached election day were less disappointed when the ballot measure failed to pass. Similarly, James Shepperd and I conducted a study of students predicting their midterm exam grade, similar to his original study, and found that students who underestimated their grade on the exam in the final moments before facing the music felt better than students who overshot in their prediction.

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comes to taking action to protect our health, negativity tends to be more motivating. Specifically, worrying about one's health spurs people into seeking out useful information, thinking critically about ways to prevent feared health outcomes, and ultimately engaging in healthy behaviours, like quitting unhealthy habits, picking up healthy ones, and going to the doctor when you should.

Much of the work on health-related worry has been carried out in the context of breast cancer. Studies by Kevin McCaul and others have found that women who report feeling worried about breast cancer tend to be up to date on their mammogram screening schedule, and a recent study by David Portnoy and his collaborators revealed that among women at a genetically elevated risk for breast cancer, women who were more worried about cancer were more likely to undergo a risk-reducing surgical procedure. It seems that taking the ‘think positive’ message too far can undermine people’s motivation to do the hard work of protecting their long-term health.

Bad for your love life
Research on successful and not-so-successful marriages finds that a dose of reality is better for long-term relationships than unbridled positivity. In the mid-2000s, relationship researchers Lisa Neff and Ben Karney looked at spouses’ perceptions of each other in two samples of opposite-sex newlyweds. Unsurprisingly, these young lovers overwhelmingly saw their partners in a generally positive light. However, people varied in how accurate they were when it came to their spouse’s specific qualities—things like intelligence, athletic ability and tidiness. Their findings showed that when wives saw their husbands more accurately on these kinds of traits, they provided better support to their husband during a tense interaction and, most importantly, tended to still be married several years later. Interestingly, the same did not hold true for husbands’ perceptions of their wives’ traits, but in neither case was unmitigated positivity beneficial for the relationship.

Other research, led by James McNulty, finds

“Disappointment, a particularly un-fun emotion, arises specifically in response to getting something that is worse than we expected. Put simply, bad news is a bummer, but unanticipated bad news is a special kind of bummer.”

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that positivity can be especially treacherous in troubled relationships. McNulty has conducted several studies of newlyweds spanning the first years of marriage. In these studies, he and his colleagues assess (among other things) the extent to which spouses tend to be generous and forgiving in their reactions to unpleasant events in their relationship. In marriages with few notable problems this strategy works like a charm, predicting more stable marital satisfaction. However, in marriages plagued by frequent and severe relationship problems, this seemingly positive strategy of overlooking a partner’s faults was associated with steep declines in satisfaction over time. It seems that positivity in this case may have undermined people’s motivation to repair (or perhaps leave) a toxic relationship.

**Not great for friendships**

When a friend is having a hard time, it can be difficult to know how to provide support. Should you try to cheer your friend up, convincing him or her that everything will be OK? Positive people do tend to be more likeable in general – but when it comes to providing social support, positivity can come across as dismissive or insensitive. A recent study in my lab asked people what they find most helpful and most unhelpful when they are awaiting important news. Although some people said they appreciate when friends or loved ones encourage them to be optimistic, it was far more common for people to find this kind of interaction downright annoying. In the words of one of our participants, ‘People telling me not to worry annoyed me. They shouldn’t tell me how to feel.’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, positive people are particularly prone to this type of social misstep. June Gruber, a leading expert in the perils of positivity, finds that people who consistently experience a lot of positive emotions in their lives are uniquely bad at understanding when others are not feeling quite so upbeat. In one study, Gruber had research participants watch videos of other people discussing an emotional event from their lives, either positive or negative. When the person in the video was discussing an intensely negative event, the death of a parent, participants who were highly positive people (who experience lots of positive emotions) were way off-base in their guesses about the emotions the person in the video was experiencing. In other words, positive people have a hard time relating to people who are feeling not-so-positive. Worse, the positive people in Gruber’s study believed that they were great at understanding how others are feeling – which leads to an empathy blind spot for positive people. This blind spot has unfortunate consequences for the positive person as well. People who maintain high levels of positivity in situations that should bring them down, like watching a sad movie or sharing in a loved one’s suffering, show greater emotional impairment and poorer overall functioning in their everyday lives.

**A marker of poor mental health**

Thus far, the research I have discussed provides a nuanced picture of positivity, suggesting that a positive outlook is benign or even beneficial in most circumstances, with some notable exceptions. However, at its extreme, positivity can be truly unhealthy. In fact, other research by June Gruber finds that people who consistently report extreme degrees of happiness tend to be less creative, engage in more risky behaviour and are at greater risk for mental illness. Specifically, extreme positivity is a hallmark of mania. One can easily grasp the risks of positivity taken too far through an encounter with someone in a manic state. A person having a manic episode is typically joyful, but overwhelmingly so; optimistic, but to the point of taking unnecessary risks with little regard for the potential consequences; and self-confident, but not attuned to the value or likelihood of success in their endeavours.

Even seeking happiness can be a risky undertaking. Work by Iris Mauss shows that people vary in how much value they place on being happy. People who strive hard for happiness set themselves up for failure and often end up more miserable than their less happiness-obsessed counterparts. They also tend to be lonelier and are at greater risk for both manic episodes and depression. Better to stumble across positivity than to chase it down.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, the research on both sides of the positivity coin can be summarised as follows: Timing and moderation are everything. Are you about to get some important news? Put aside your positive thoughts in the final moments before the new arrives. Do you need to motivate yourself to get healthier? Give some thought to worst-case scenarios. Are you trying to be a good friend or relationship partner? Check in with yourself to make sure you are seeing things accurately. Otherwise, a hearty helping of happiness might be just what the doctor ordered.
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