

DOWN RIGHT
raw



ISSUE 01.

positivity
OPPORTUNITY
creativity

You're not alone in your grief—

“I’M CHOOSING TO BE HAPPY.”

I love my friend dearly, but when she responded to my stop-start attempt at expressing my feelings with this statement, I swallowed hard. And with it, the urge to scream “your toxic positivity isn’t helping anyone.”

I’d like to believe I’m responding to the COVID-19 pandemic with a healthy dose of acceptance and level-headedness.

When I found myself hiding underneath the doona cover, unable to count three things I’m grateful for, I breathed through the anger. And when I was doubled over from laughing too hard at my partner’s Knock-Knock joke, I acknowledged the prang of guilt in my stomach also. But I know this hasn’t been everyone’s experience.

THAT DISCOMFORT YOU’RE FEELING IS GRIEF.

And you need to name it, feel it and sit with it. We see extremes in times of uncertainty. There are the scaremongers, in-denials and conspiracy theorists who refuse to believe anything they’re told or what is being reported globally.

And there are the people who remain overly positive, telling you to smile, think happy thoughts, will opportunities into existence and enjoy this time away from the norm. This is the definition of toxic positivity; ignoring negative thoughts and refusing to acknowledge the feelings and concerns of others. The belief that you need to have a positive response to every situation, no matter how severe the circumstance, is an unhealthy coping mechanism. You may feel like you are protecting yourself from pain by denying unpleasant emotions. But you are increasing your chances of experiencing fear, anger and sadness more intensely.

Just as spreading false information can lead to heightened states of anxiety amongst communities, so can encouraging people to only be happy. Humans are meant to experience all emotions. When people place pressure on themselves or feel pressure from others, to always be happy, they are more likely to see their negative emotions as signals of failure. This leads to more unhappiness.

We need to recognise and accept that feeling frustration, despair and powerlessness is part of the human experience. And stop judging ourselves and others for feeling these emotions, particularly in times where we are all experiencing varying degrees of hardship. Our shared grief should bring us together and reduce the effects of trauma. But practising emotional acceptance, not avoidance is easier said than done.

My girlfriend called me a week later to tell me she had been ‘stood down’ at work. I sat patiently as she talked me through her new stay-at-home to-do list and how she was thankful that she had a job to return to (“not everyone does,” she reminded me). It was at that moment that I could no longer contain my feelings. I launched into a three-minute rant on why I was sick of being told how to think and act, and how it was making me feel alone in my grief.

“But I don’t want to be a Debbie Downer,” she murmured when it was clear I was done.

“It’s normal to cry if you want to,” I replied. You can be grateful and mad at the same time; both feelings are true.”

“You’re right; I’m going to have an angry cry!” And with that, she hung up the phone. Leaving me to sit on the edge of my bed, reflecting on how I can better practice compassion as the world moves through the seven stages of grief collectively.



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