

Open in app




174K Followers

About

Follow

# The Opposite of Toxic Positivity

"Tragic optimism" is the search for meaning during the inevitable tragedies of human existence, and is better for us than avoiding darkness and trying to "stay positive"

 The Atlantic 1 day ago · 5 min read ★

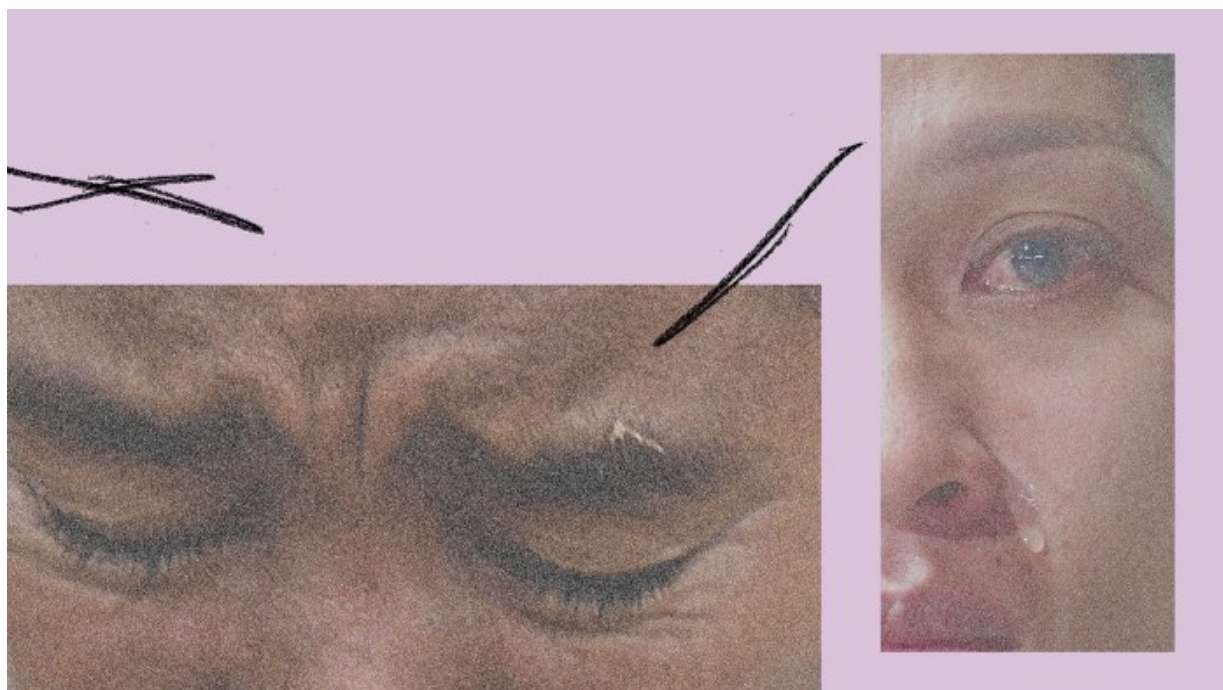


Image: The Atlantic. Source images: Christopher Furlong / Getty; Nhac Nguyen / AFP / Getty

By Scott Barry Kaufman

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.

In recent years, scientists have begun to recognize that the practice of gratitude can be a key driver of post-traumatic growth after an adverse event, and that gratitude can be a healing force. Indeed, a number of positive mental-health outcomes are linked to a regular gratitude practice, such as reduced lifetime risk for depression, anxiety, and substance-abuse disorders.

The human capacity for resiliency is quite remarkable and underrated. A recent study surveyed more than 500 people from March to May 2020. It found that even during those terrifying early months of the pandemic, more than 56 percent of people reported feeling grateful, which was 17 percent higher than any other positive emotion. Those who reported feeling more grateful also reported being happier. What's more, even more people — 69 percent of respondents — reported expecting to feel grateful two to three months in the future.

I believe that an overlooked route to gratitude is exposure to difficult circumstances. There are many basic advantages of life itself that we too often take for granted. After all, humans have a natural tendency to adapt and become used to situations that are relatively stable. When individuals become aware that their advantages are not guaranteed, many then come to appreciate them more. As the writer G. K. Chesterton put it, "Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are."

Indeed, several studies have found that people who have confronted difficult circumstances report that their appreciation for life itself has increased, and some of the most grateful people have gone through some of the hardest experiences. Kristi Nelson, the executive director of A Network for Grateful Living, faced her own mortality at the age of 33, when she received a cancer diagnosis and had to undergo multiple surgeries, chemo, and radiation. Nevertheless, she writes that she was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to cultivate gratefulness:

I was in the hospital, separated from all my friends and family and tethered to all kinds of IVs and dealing with pain. And yet, I had nurses and technicians and doctors and cleaners who came into my room every single day. I remember thinking, what if this is my whole world now, what if this is all I have? And then I thought, I can always love these people.

Nelson makes a distinction between *gratitude* — a momentary emotion — and *gratefulness*, an “overall orientation” that is “not contingent on something happening to us, but rather a way that we arrive to life.” Part of being human is that we will forget our past suffering and start to take our current life for granted. But as Nelson notes, “The work is to remember more often than we forget.”

The gratitude researcher Lilian Jans-Beken and existential positive psychologist Paul Wong created an “Existential Gratitude Scale” to measure the tendency people have to feel grateful for *all* of human existence, not just the positive aspects. Their scale includes items such as:

- I am grateful for my life even in times of suffering.
- I am grateful that my inner resources have increased as a result of overcoming adversities.
- I am grateful for the people in my life, even for those who have caused me much pain.
- I am thankful that I have something to live for, even though life has been very hard for me.
- I am grateful that every crisis represents an opportunity for me to grow.
- I have learned the importance of gratitude through suffering.

The researchers found that existential gratitude was associated with higher “spiritual well-being” (the perception of an individual’s spiritual quality of life). This finding is

important considering that gratitude and spirituality have been shown to be protective factors against both anxiety and depression.

The spiritual core of gratefulness is essential if gratitude is to be more than a tool for narcissistic self-improvement. A common misconception is that gratitude is necessarily self-serving, that it's all about appreciating *my* life and *my* blessings, in spite of the suffering of others. But as Emmons and the psychoanalyst Robin Stern of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence note, "True gratefulness rejoices in the other. Its ultimate goal is to reflect back the goodness that one has received by creatively seeking opportunities for giving." Indeed, the researchers who did the pandemic gratitude study found that the more grateful people were, the more they reported that they were more likely to help others.

Gratitude as a fleeting emotion can come and go, but gratefulness, or "existential gratitude," can pervade your entire life, throughout its ups and downs. It asks for nothing but is on the lookout to find the hidden benefit and the opportunities for growth in everything — even during a global pandemic. As Emmons said at the recent International Meaning Conference, "Gratitude is not just a switch to turn on when things go well; it is also a light that shines in the darkness."

*Scott Barry Kaufman is a cognitive scientist and humanistic psychologist. He is the founder and director of the Center for the Science of Human Potential, and the author of several books, including Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization.*

Psychology   Wellbeing   Gratitude

About   Write   Help   Legal

Get the Medium app