

The Danger in Fake Positivity and Spiritual Bypassing



Negative emotions and experiences allow us to grow

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These days, the realm of spirituality (and sometimes psychology) can feel fake. Instagram and other social media are jammed with influencer posts about positive vibes, about not allowing negative energy or thoughts to get to you, about surrounding yourself with only supportive, positive people.

Unless you live in a bubble or on Mars, this is not only unrealistic, but also a recipe for never growing or truly learning who you are. If you attempt to transcend or avoid difficult experiences, you can remain emotionally stunted. Spiritually minded psychologists and teachers refer to this as spiritual bypassing. Like it or not, the ugly parts of our humanity are where growth can occur. In the words of Buddhist teacher, author, and nun Pema Chödrön:

“Feelings like disappointment, embarrassment, irritation, resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear... are actually very clear moments that teach us where it is that we’re holding back. They’re like messengers that tell us, with terrifying clarity, exactly where we’re stuck.”

Many emotions serve as flags indicating an opportunity for us to learn. Challenge, sorrow, change, discomfort, conflict, hatred, depression, and anxiety are paths to growth and change. We can explore and accept the parts of ourselves society urges us to keep tucked away. Painful or uncomfortable experiences enable us to grow past our current emotional and spiritual states.

Fake positivity can perpetuate a lot of the stigma around mental illness. Encouraging someone who has clinical depression to focus on the positive is not helpful and can actually do more harm. This advice can bolster the feeling that they are at fault because they cannot simply pull themselves up by the bootstraps. I tell people struggling with depression that they are more tuned in to real human experience and emotion than those pushing the positive-vibes-only agenda.

Clients don’t come to therapy or seek life coaching because everything in their lives is going wonderfully. They are stuck in a pattern chock-full of negative emotions, and they cannot seem to break free. Sometimes we need an unbiased third party to help us see what we are running from or challenge us to face what we are unwilling to feel. Friends and loved ones can’t do it for us; we have too many emotional ties. Doing this difficult work can lead to lasting change. It takes real courage to stop pretending you have it all together and shake hands with deep sadness or childhood trauma. (Yes, this is a plug for going to therapy. I can’t help it. I’m a therapist.) The path of individuation asks for total integration of all facets of the self: good, bad, and ugly.

Sometimes there is nothing to do with or about these emotions. Sometimes we need to simply acknowledge these feelings—to sit with sorrow, resentment, or jealousy without trying to change the experience or pick it apart. We have to allow ourselves to unfold, to witness emotions flooding our system, to breathe into the places in our bodies where we are stuck. We experience a softening when we allow space for all emotions, not just those that feel good.

If we can allow ourselves the space and acceptance to be multifaceted, we will experience life to its fullest. Being human means facing suffering. There is no light without dark, no joy without sadness. If we don't experience all feelings, we have no basis for comparison. If we run from certain emotions by staying busy, expressing fake positivity, or abusing mood-altering substances, we are cutting away half our existence. When we stop and honour difficult emotions, we have the opportunity to live fully and integrate all parts of ourselves. These feelings will torment us until we stop running from them—and from the truth of who we are.

Next time you feel a sense of anger, fear, or sorrow, I challenge you to pause, get still, and remain quiet. Notice the feeling in your body and take a deep breath into that space. You might even place a hand on the spot—the chest, the stomach, the throat—where the emotion seems to reside. When you recognize these feelings, you truly honour your humanity. You may feel a loosening or a challenging emotion washing over you. But it will fade, like a wave that crashes on the shore before receding into the ocean.

It's also important to own your feelings. No one can make anyone feel any particular way. It may seem like someone else is triggering us, but the source of discomfort is always within. Blaming your anger or resentment on someone else is a very easy way to bypass the inner work.

The path of individuation asks for total integration of all facets of the self: good, bad, and ugly. Don't get discouraged by the difficult moments and emotions, and don't push them away or diminish someone else's experience by encouraging fake positivity. Uncovering and understanding the self is a lifelong journey that demands rejection of conventional attitudes and the mask of positivity. June Singer, noted American psychologist, put it this way:

"It is an easy thing to say 'be yourself', but quite another thing to know who you truly are. How can you be yourself if you do not know that self? Therefore, the process of individuation becomes a seeking after self-knowledge."