

Always look on the bright side of life?

As we find ourselves in an increasingly challenging world, and work in professions that may bring us face to face with the most testing environments and care, is always seeking the positive actually a help or a hindrance to our own wellbeing and sustainability?

Throughout this article, I would like to argue for the potential dangers of always looking on the bright side of life, and how we may find a more balanced and realistic outlook, with the goal of ultimately serving us better in the long run.

The (potential) issue

Before it seems as though I am arguing for us to resign to the many challenging areas that we may find within our lives and work, I would like to try and make clear the argument I am putting forward and the potential reasons for it.

I have written in other articles about the importance of being honest with ourselves and offering acceptance to all parts of our experience, especially the bits that are particularly unappealing. And what I am putting forward here is something similar to that. If there is real value, and a reduction in psychological distress, by being able to allow our variety of true experiences, then maybe the tendency to focus solely on the positive could actually be counter-productive.

There is a fine balance to strike here. We don't force or over-identify with any single part of our experience, but we can actually have a more realistic and, ultimately, whole view of our ever-changing and varied life experiences.

Suppose we are continually biased towards the positive. In that case, it goes without saying that we will often be denying a large part of our natural experience – mainly the challenging or 'not-so-positive' elements. Equally, as we may find in something such as depression, the alternative can also be dangerous – to continually seek the negative or not allow any positive experiences into our awareness. For me, these are two sides of the same coin, and whilst being positive might have more social value, I believe we risk imbalance and psychological tension with either.

The place for positivity

It is also important that in arguing this point, I don't fall victim to the same potential trap

– that I dismiss the need and use of positives within our lives and the perfectly valid and helpful part they have to play, especially in testing job roles and situations.

I can really see the value in seeking and leaning on the positives that we can find in many situations. In the middle of a gruelling shift, morale is dwindling, and the appointment calendar is close to bursting. We might just need to find that little spark we have left in us, or the thing we are looking forward to after work, or even sometimes the trusty 'fake it 'til you make it' to get through and positively impact others in the process.

There are undoubtedly times when finding that extra bit of energy or positivity gets you through the long hours, impossible demands and lack of appreciation, and maybe you can't see any other way to do it.

There is a place for positivity, there is a place for putting the blinkers on and zoning in on that bit you need to get you through – no doubt. However, my focus and concerns are more around the bigger picture and where this sits in the grand scheme of your outlook and approach to life.

How heavy is your beach ball?

I remember being told of an analogy of trying our hardest to hold a beach ball underwater as hard and for as long as we could. The inevitable outcome is that the more we try and the longer we do that, the more force the beach ball has on its return to the surface. Denying our personal experiences can look something like this.

Maybe sometimes we do need to hold something at bay, below the surface. To just get through this next thing, before I can give it attention, but do we actually end up giving it attention? What often happens is that we never get around to it, or it is a familiar postponing that we do more often than we would like to admit. Some can be balanced and measured in the times we need to look at or delay certain areas, but I think for the majority, denying or turning away can be more of a long-term strategy.

This is where we can meet our problem with being attached to positivity or not allowing room for other experiences. If this is a repetitive tendency, then where do all the experiences that do not fit in with this go, and what is the

Chris Molyneux

BACP Senior Accredited
Counsellor and Supervisor
UK

Key words

- Positivity
- Congruence
- Person-centred approach
- Acceptance

cost? These denied experiences don't just tend to disappear or have no impact on us. Instead, they tend to make the beach ball heavier and harder to hold down, splashing to the surface in a whole host of ways.

Therefore, it may be helpful to think of the areas, emotions or types of people that are particularly challenging for you and why. To give an example in view of what we have explored so far – could a lack of tolerance for sadness, sharing difficulties or vulnerability be signs that we struggle to accept these things in ourselves? That we rely on the positive to keep us safe from having to experience these discomforts?

Our patients

This can also hold true in our interactions with others. In person-centred counselling, these can often be referred to as the 'not-for-growth' parts of our clients. As a general rule, counsellors (and maybe all of us) are often drawn toward the "positive" aspects of others. If we are presented with a client who explains that they are both seeing the positive changes in themselves and also scared of what might happen, we may tend to respond more, or solely, to the part of them that is seeing the positive changes.

This is a natural inclination because I think we are often encouraged and taught, quite simply, that positivity is good and should be encouraged, and negativity is bad and should be avoided. Within person-centred counselling, there is a strong preference to be accepting and understanding of any person's experience, whatever it might be. Whatever they are experiencing is there for a reason and all has meaning and significance for the individual. So rather than be selective and dismissive of elements that we don't believe to be helpful, we should meet each aspect with equal validation and respect.

I may be talking from somewhat of a luxury, having 50-minute sessions with clients and many continuous weeks to follow these types of processes and unpacking. For yourselves, as well as the many demands you face, you are likely to have a small window and increasing requirements to see to in your time with patients. So maybe this is a naïve wondering on my part?

I wonder how much we might be pulled into the place of reassuring patients, focusing on the 'for-growth' parts or missing some of the concerns because we feel sure in our knowledge and experience of this particular treatment?

Let me try and put it in another way to make the point. How often might we hear (or give) the

response that is well-intentioned in reassurance but might actually miss the experience of another?

- "I'm really worried about doing this well" → "Don't worry, you'll be fine!!"
- "I'm worried this wound will never heal" → "I've seen this hundreds of times, it will!"
- "I feel like I look really frumpy in this" → "You look great! Don't be silly!"

Now, of course, your knowledge is essential to the care you offer. You are in your role for a reason and have a very clear expertise that is vital to patients. So, similar to above, this is not to say that there isn't a place for reassurance or medical expertise, but whatever the diagnosis or likely outcome, how would it be to just be with the full experience of another, whether valid or not? (spoiler alert: it's always valid!).

Ourselves

As I have mentioned many times before, the true test with many of these things is not in offering it to others but in offering it to ourselves. The reason that a large part of counselling training is actually working through our own difficulties and developing our self-awareness, is because this often has a direct correlation with what we are able to offer to others.

For example, if we struggle to accept anxiety in ourselves, then the way that we are able to hold and accept anxiety in others is going to be largely affected.

When we think about this through the lens of positivity, not only does there seem to be a strong argument for being more open to the variety of our own experiences, but this is also going to have a huge impact on what we will be open to receive from others and how we respond to this too.

If we are in a position of needing to cling to positivity to make it through, then the presentation of anything other than this is going to be a huge threat to us, and we will respond accordingly. This may have varying degrees of presentation, and sometimes it can actually be quite subtle, but the old adage that you can only go as far with others as you have gone with yourself has never been truer.

Conclusion

What I have tried to represent through this article is the natural variety of experiences that we have as humans and the dangers that can present themselves if we try to censor these to suit our needs. As I mentioned throughout, it is completely understandable, and sometimes even necessary, to be able to find the positives, but what is helpful to observe in ourselves is the



Embracing the full spectrum of human experience ... fosters resilience, deepens empathy, and cultivates a more sustainable way of being.



attachment and ultimate need of this in the bigger picture.

Suppose this feels part of a balanced representation, where we feel able to move through the different emotions and presentations, both in ourselves and others. In that case, this naturally comes with more ease and less negative impact. However, if we follow Eric Idle's words and have to always do this,

then we will be limiting our own, and other's experience, and in addition, likely pay the price for it too.

Embracing the full spectrum of human experience, both in ourselves and in those we care for, may not always feel easy. But in doing so, we foster resilience, deepen empathy and cultivate a more sustainable way of being, both at work and beyond. ●