

Ep #88: False Positivity



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With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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If you spend about two seconds on social media these days, you may notice the pervasive story that everything is just fine, thank you. The cheer squad of folks in the wellness world, encouraging you to have #positivevibesonly, and to find gratitude and positivity at every turn.

Now, don't get me wrong. I love positivity and positive thinking, but unless we're being realistic and acknowledging and holding space for the pain and the hurt and the challenges of life, we're not being honest with ourselves or the world.

Have you ever heard yourself say, who am I to complain? Have you ever held back of sharing the truth of your hurting because you're worried someone will tell you to find the bright side, negating your sorrow? I sure have. If this is resonating, my darling love, you're going to want to keep listening. It's going to be a good one.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. And if you're not doing well, that's perfectly fine too. And it's today's topic. How perfectly perfect it is if you're not doing well, and how important it is to get real with that.

In my own healing journey, I've come to recognize how often I used to pretend that everything was okay because it felt so scary to get real about what was not working. It felt safer in my mind and my body, my inner

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children felt safer when I was telling the story that I was fine. Everything's fine with me.

Because I didn't want anyone to worry about me, to pay attention to me, because that attention felt so uncomfortable and cringey. To ask me questions I was scared I either couldn't answer, or that if I did start to answer those questions, I would collapse and fall into an emotional pit of despair I feared I could never crawl out of.

It honestly felt like the world might end if someone else saw that I wasn't actually okay in a real way. I also recently realized that this child part of me was scared that I would get in trouble if I was upset or hurt, if I wasn't okay. That I would be punished or negated or told I was wrong for feeling less than amazing.

I was worried I would hear, look at all you have, who are you to be upset? Who are you to complain? Today, we'll be talking about this habit of hiding our ouch. The hazards of false positivity and not getting real about what's not okay in your life.

Coming up soon, we'll be talking about the habit of using complaining as a buffer against our true tenderness, which is not a negation of what I'm about to say. It's just an addendum. But make sure you're subscribed to the show so you don't miss that one.

So my beauty, it may sound something like this in your brain. Something challenging happens, and you immediately move to everything is fine, I'm totally fine, things are okay. And the background thought is who am I with all of this privilege, I live indoors, I have food to eat, my parents immigrated and worked so hard for me, my mom - maybe the story is your mom quit

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her job to stay home, or your mom worked three jobs to make your life possible.

Whatever that story is, it boils down to who am I to be anything less than happy, fine, okay? And I hear this all the time from my clients, this denial of their own upset. Because they think it's not for them to be less than happy, or their brains say that if they let themselves feel it all, it will surely overwhelm and kill them. A feeling I know all too well in my own physiology.

When I was in college, we often joked about what we called the suffering Olympics. Like, there was this hierarchy of ills and suffering that creates this story that if things aren't horrifyingly wrong, like if you're not living in a war zone, that you don't really have a problem.

And thus, that internal question is spawned. Who am I to complain? It was this negation of our own pain because others had it worse. And I want to dive into how harmful that way of thinking can be, especially for those of us socialized as girls and women.

We are so often taught to put up with it. We are conditioned to make the best of it. We're often taught to hold our feelings in, not to nag or whine or be needy. Not to be a problem or a bother. So too, Black folks, BIPOC folks, queer folks are taught to go along to get along with the sexist comment, the homophobic comment, the subtle putdown, the racist micro aggression, not to make a fuss. Not to be a bother, not to be seen as angry or a problem.

I also see this framework so often in my immigrant clients. My parents did so much to come to this country for me, who am I to complain? And it carries with it, often in the background, often unknown, in that subconscious, the survivor's guilt of having gotten out of or been brought

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as a child out of actually dangerous, actually really scary situations, to live in comfort. To live with running water. Who am I to complain?

And for those of us with a history of codependent, people pleasing, and perfectionist thinking, we can be really great at avoiding the challenging feelings like sadness, disappointment, and anger, because we have this deep fear that if we show others we aren't okay, then they won't be okay.

And that is dangerous for us because our worldview sounds like if everyone else isn't okay, I am not okay. So we sugarcoat our pain and try to minimize it when we are the one suffering deep inside. In perfectionist thinking, we hide our success and our hardships because we are so scared of being a failure, and because we fear someone else telling us that we're wrong, criticizing us.

So we hide our achievements and our pain. My darling, darling love, just because someone else told you that your pain doesn't matter doesn't mean you have to believe them. Let me say that again. Just because someone else told you that your pain doesn't matter does not mean you have to believe them.

Your child self may have believed them totally. But adult you doesn't have to. You don't have to borrow that thought, believe that thought, live as though that thought is real because it's just not. Your pain matters because it does, and you get to be honest and real with yourself about it.

With the truest, deepest love for you, I will say this; false positivity, pretending everything is okay is BS-ing yourself. It's not honest. It's not kind to yourself or anyone else. It hurts you deeply. And it's not conducive to you living with true intention, which we talked about in episode 84.

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As always, I will say this too. This habit of pretending you're okay, of reaching for the false positivity and trying not to upset anyone else by admitting you're hurt or upset yourself is your beautiful, loving brain trying to protect you. It doesn't want you to feel bad and that's loving and protective. I hope you can hear and see that.

Maybe you grew up in a situation where showing challenging emotions was not welcome. Maybe that's the safest thing for your inner child who, let's face it, was stuck with whatever the circumstances were in your family of origin, in your culture, your society, facing whatever systems of oppression you grew up surviving and managing.

The safest thing for that little one was to make the best of things, and to act like everything was okay, even when it wasn't. So what's the problem here? Isn't it better to act positive than to wallow in negativity? I mean, well sure, unless you're lying to yourself.

So often, our brains tell us stories, effectively lies. Untruths like I'm not good enough, who am I to ask for help, I'll never measure up, my business won't succeed, I'm unlovable. Stories that we are not worthy, that keep us from doing what we know and want for ourselves.

And eventually, this can lead to an overall sense of apathy about our own lives when we don't feel the internal locus of control to choose our thoughts in the face of the stories our brains have been conditioned to tell.

And when we strengthen the story that our pain and hurts don't matter and aren't worth voicing, especially if voicing your ouch in childhood led to negation of your pain, being told not to complain, hearing the old suck it up buttercup, or stiff upper lip narrative. If you knew in your brilliance that you wouldn't get heard, validated, cared for, loved, or that you would get

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punished for complaining, told you have a roof over your head, food on your plate, no reason to complain when others have it so bad, that apathy, that lack of ownership makes sense.

And what happens when we play along with this who am I to be complaining narrative, in attempting to push our struggles down and away is that we multiply the problem. We make it all so much worse by pretending we aren't hurt because the hurt doesn't go away. And we block ourselves from finding solutions.

When you tell yourself it's not okay to own what's going on for you, you cannot work to change it. I say this one all the time. And I will say it again. You can't heal what you can't feel, my darling.

In contrast, when you are committed to living with intention that includes pausing and recognizing the habitual thoughts that keep you out of intentional living, it means telling yourself the truth about what you're feeling, acknowledging the truth of your feels and having a range of emotions is beautiful and so vital for our wellness.

As long as you are pretending everything is okay when it's not, you are not being honest with yourself. And that leads to trying to push the challenging or difficult feelings away through buffering, which we talked about in episode 14. And buffering is the habit of attempting to not feel your feels by doing something. Anything to distract yourself from dealing with it.

Like watching TV or drinking or eating or smoking or exercising or gossiping as a way of unintentionally or unconsciously attempting to make the challenging things go away through avoidance. And while I'm never demonizing any behavior, the choice to use those behaviors as a buffer, to try to not feel a thing does not serve us in the long run.

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And when we are buffering, we cannot show up for ourselves and the people we love in the ways we want to. One of the most common ways this fear of owning our pain shows up for my clients and showed up for me so big is in taking on the fixer role, which we talked about in episode 71.

If it's not okay for you to acknowledge the hard stuff, you're going to want to fix the pain and struggles and worries of everyone else in your world, to try to take tons of actions to make their pain go away because you're so uncomfortable with your own pain.

Versus giving the people you love space to feel all of their feels, including feeling really shitty. Because feeling like crap is a normal, natural, and important part of being a human. It's so important to acknowledge the pain, my love, in ourselves and others, instead of attempting to push it down and away, instead of negating in others what was negated in you.

My beauty, we all need room to have a bad day or a bad week or year. I'm looking at you, 2020. We need that room to acknowledge when things are not working for us. False positivity blocks us from living a real life with human authenticity and can keep us in lousy situations because we tell ourselves well, I mean, it's not really that lousy. Who am I to complain?

I worked with a client who's dated a 12-year relationship with someone who is chronically depressed and wasn't taking care of themselves, who wasn't showing up for my client or their relationship. And she stayed because she told herself it was fine enough, and that it would change, right? If she just stuck around and worked harder, it would change.

And that it was okay if her partner couldn't offer her the care or attention she wanted and needed, the interdependence, the reciprocity, the mutuality. But all of those things never came. You see, false positivity,

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putting lipstick on the old internal pig often brings with it false hope. A story that if you suffer long enough, things will change.

And I see this so often. To be clear my beauty, I'm in no way dissing anyone with chronic depression. I've totally been there myself. The point here is that in this example, the relationship was so not working for my client. She loved to go out, she loved to be in nature, to hike, to socialize, to have friends over, and her partner wanted none of that. And so she got none of that in her attempts to fix her partner, fix the chronic depression, by going along with what her partner wanted, though it wasn't what she needed.

In short, she was unconsciously - I'm not saying she did this on purpose. But she was lying to herself, to attempt to ward off challenging, negative feelings. And I'm saying negative while making little air quotes because I don't believe that any feelings are negative. But stay with me.

So instead of facing the challenging feelings, she spent 12 years in an unfulfilling relationship until she got coaching and could finally see what was really going on. My sweet beautiful tender little ravioli of a human, I get it. We think we are bad for having negative thoughts and feelings. Someone taught you to think that way.

You were socialized, potentially, I know I was, to think positive. And we see it all over social media, this positive vibes only culture that I find so problematic. Once again, yes to positive energy and thoughts and feelings, but only in the context of reality, and not emotional bypassing. Not in pretending things are all sunshine and rainbows when they really just are not all the time because life isn't meant to be 100% positive at all times.

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A client of mine who is undergoing cancer treatment told me she feels this constant pressure to be upbeat and positive and to have an I'm going to beat this cancer attitude. Even when she mostly feels tired and worn down by the treatment and its side effects and scared about the uncertainty of her health and the effect of this push to feel really positive and have this upbeat attitude.

For her is to lead her to feel like a bad cancer patient. And those are her words. It makes me feel like a bad cancer patient. And if she acknowledges the terribleness and doesn't get better, then somehow, it's all her fault for not being positive enough. And that framework just sucks on so many levels.

When we don't let ourselves feel the anger or other negative emotions, those energies get trapped in your body. My nerds, when we are holding the anger, the disappointment, the hurt, the sorrow, the sadness at bay and not processing it through our bodies, not letting it out, we armor our human bodies against the pain, braced for the blow like a boxer in the ring, building up tension in our fascia, our muscles, leading to headaches, neck aches, jaw pain, belly aches, so much discomfort and stress.

If the story in our mind is that everything has to be perfect or everything is completely effed, then we start to train our physiology to brace against something being bad because it's not okay for it to be bad, the story goes.

Knowing we have no outlet because who am I to complain, we hold it all in where it festers and effectively poisons us. We live a life where we're always on alert and waiting for the other shoe to drop because we have learned to expect something bad to happen and that we won't let ourselves process that emotion through our bodies.

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We have come to correlate on this physiologic level something challenging. An internal pain of holding it in. But if you accept that lousy and terrible things happen, that they are just as much a part of life as beauty, then you actually don't have to fear any shoe dropping.

You can begin to allow yourself to step into deep acceptance, which is as always, so different from condoning whatever injustice or pain or bad thing is happening. It's simply accepting that that thing is real and happening, so you can see where your own locus of control is. And it's often in your own mind.

There's a reason that so many of us with codependent histories and ways of thinking have physical manifestations of our mental state. You can tell yourself I hate my job and I'm so lucky to have it, but you can only do that for so long before the tension builds up in your body and you end up collapsed, overwhelmed, exhausted.

In my many years in primary care and functional medicine, I saw this time after time. Adrenal and digestive concerns from the chronic hypervigilance, and thus chronic elevated cortisol of fighting against the realities of life. I know my own irritable bowel syndrome, IBS, small intestine bacterial overgrowth, SIBO, were worsened by stress because science.

And by pretending everything is glorious or even just fine, thank you, when you're so often really suffering is a massive systemic biological stressor. Your mind, body, and spirit are not separate things, my love. You are one glorious animal with a mind, body, spirit that is in constant internal conversation and trying to separate them out doesn't serve you, just like disavowing your need to see what there is to complain about also does not serve you.

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And false positivity doesn't just take on your mind and body. It impacts the depth of your joy. If you do not allow yourself to feel challenging things, you can't see or feel the real positivity in life. It's okay for things to feel terrible. That's real. That's human. That's important.

You're going to have some lousy days. And you need to learn how to create space for those feelings for yourself and for others. To release your totally understandable desire to want to rush in to buffer, or fix, or change things for yourself or others on the emotional plane.

And note that as always, I'm not talking about wanting to change political realities. Please, rush in and change those and I'll be right beside you at the protest. Right now, we're talking about wanting to change feelings instead of feeling them.

What I want most for you and for me is a radical honesty and authenticity. The willingness to really acknowledge what you feel, to see how things really are, to let yourself know what you actually want, and to know that you deserve those things.

False positivity keeps us from looking at our habitual thoughts and the circumstances in our life that may not serve us because they're all sugarcoated and shiny. I know, don't I know that looking at your own habitual thoughts is challenging and hard. I do it every day.

But it's among the most important work you can do to move towards living the life you actually want. And that means letting go of false positivity and learning to see things exactly as they are with clear eyes, pausing to accept how things are and how you really feel about them.

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Only then are you in a position to truly decide what you want to do about it all. If you want to keep those feelings or shift them using thought work. My sweetness, what's the worst thing that happens when you let go of false positivity?

Well, you might feel really shitty, really angry, really sad, a host of other feelings. And my darling, that's okay. Because when you let go of false positivity, you also get to face the truth of things as they really are.

Or you can choose to continue to push it away. You have a choice. You can face the realities, or you can face the consequences of continuing to push reality away. And by buffering or emotionally bypassing, trying to pretend that the challenging things aren't challenging, you're effectively just kicking the can down the road and delaying or compounding the eventual negativity.

My sweetness, it just doesn't work. You get to decide if you want to live a radically honest life. It's hard and it's painful and it sucks, but I will choose it every single day after a lifetime of not choosing it, working to avoid seeing what was challenging, living in that framework of who am I to complain, and trying to slap some BS false positivity on my pain.

Because when you block the bad, you also block the good. There's no shadow without light, but there's also no light without shadow. And I'll invite you, my beautiful love, to let the light in.

If what I've said here resonates for you and if you're looking for support to process your feelings, to drop the tired old stories you're telling about your life and to start living with radical honesty and intention, you're going to want to check out my six-month masterclass program, *Overcoming Codependency*.

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We're starting up again in early 2021, and I'd be so delighted to have you join us. Head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass. Read all about it, learn about it, see if it resonates for you. Fill out the quick form there and my team will be in touch to get you on my schedule. Let's talk all about it. I would love to support you to live your most intentional life in a truthful and honest way.

Alright, let's do what we do. Nice deep breath in and out. Remember, you are safe, you are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my darling. Acknowledge when you're not, and I'll talk to you soon. Ciao.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.