

On Toxic Positivity in Educational Settings: A Neuroscientific Rejoinder

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship in pedagogy often seeks to balance cognitive development with other growth benchmarks (e.g. emotional maturity, conscientiousness). Recently, educational spaces have emphasized the role of positivity building as a means to strike that balance, but critics have identified a tendency for positive psychology to turn toxic under certain conditions. This essay elaborates on the nascent study of toxic positivity through connection with established findings in neuroscience to further refine emerging critique. Specifically, I compare recent studies in neuroscience with the principles of Toxic Positivity to evaluate empirical validity. In this essay, I examine 3 core principles and implications of toxic positivity through the lens of neuroscience. First, the backlash of expressive suppression as an emotional regulation strategy towards negativity; Second, obsession towards best case scenario optimizing; Third, prioritization of a positive mental narrative over constructive and informational feedback. Then, I will provide two case studies in which the concepts of toxic positivity would be contextualized and its consequences analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

Educators and scholars are interested in feedback strategies that balance emotional management with cognitive improvement (Blair & Dennis, 2010; Perlman, 2010). While pedagogical studies have always, to some extent, concerned themselves with the overall wellbeing of students, the introduction and dominance of the STEM paradigm and its attendant emphasis on measurable success brought with it emotion-management driven responses that emphasized alternative social goods (Ye et al., 2015). In the last 15 years, research in educational practices has contributed to a grand push towards emotion-forward focus in classroom environments which attempts to prioritize student well-being over independent quantitative measurements of achievement (Armijo, 2025). While renewed interest in student well-being has largely been met positively, recent critics have identified a growing trend in Positivity Pedagogy where efforts to create inclusive, thoughtful, and affirmative environments may inadvertently create toxic spaces where criticism and expression are actively stifled (Valiente et al., 2020.; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Dicke et al., 2014; Fried, 2011).

Psychology Today defines Toxic Positivity as "the act of avoiding, suppressing, or rejecting negative emotions or experiences" (Drevitch, 2025). In practice, this takes the form of denying emotional auditing,

reducing incentives for negative communication, and discouraging critical feedback, with the goal of creating supportive, emotionally nurturing environments. The impetus for these environments is a rational response to extreme pressure on contributors for achievement, which explains why the majority of literature on Toxic Positivity emerges from the world of business and organizational communication. It is doubtful that practitioners of Toxic Positivity begin with the aim of creating negative-valence social environments. Rather, Toxic Positivity often begins with the belief "that people should maintain a positive mindset no matter how dire or difficult a situation is" (Insights Psychology, 2025, para.3). On the surface, this approach may seem neutral or even beneficial - one can imagine how cultivating a positive-mindset encourages participants to give it their all, insist on overcoming barriers, and focus on elevating their agency. A cursory review of Toxic Positivity in emergent business studies literature reveals three key features: emotion management, stifling dissent, and dismissal of negative feedback.

The first core feature of Toxic Positivity is the intent to allay negative emotions. Toxic Positivity is rarely intended to cause harm: more often, it may be a kneejerk reaction such as telling someone "everything happens for a reason" after facing a loss, but quickly the culture of Toxic Positivity can elevate to shaming expressions of negativity. Psychologist Tabitha Kirkland explains that Toxic Positivity "dismisses emotions instead of affirming them" and often comes "from a place of discomfort" that confuses our internal emotional orientation with what is best for the collective (Princing, 2021, para.7). This mindset begins with the perspective that what may be uncomfortable for "me" will be uncomfortable for everyone, and thus expressions of negativity are essentially selfish because they put the needs of the expresser above the well-being of the group.

The second core feature of Toxic Positivity is the preemptive stifling of dissent. Actors within the Toxic Positivity context often face a fear of judgment for expressing difficult emotions (Culture Partners, 2024). This approach creates a chilling effect that inherently discourages speaking out against institutional culture and practices. Despite the intent to motivate workers to overcome barriers, Toxic Positivity is more likely to make honest communication uncomfortable because criticism is inherently oppositional to the collective ethos (Smith, 2025). Furthermore, because Toxic Positivity creates a false sense of perfectionism, participants may second-guess their own judgment and dismiss their insights as mistaken because they perceive a general happiness among peers, thereby suggesting any identified problem is personal. Ultimately, this leads to a culture of avoidance over a culture of engagement, where uncomfortable truths are spoken around or ignored and imperfections are left to fester.

The third and most insidious aspect of Toxic Positivity is the outright dismissal of negative feedback (Higginbotham, 2025). The most common form of dismissal will be the insistence that a practitioner work harder, get creative, or otherwise activate personal agency to overcome barriers to success. The cultural nature of the western societal context, wherein toxic positivity is framed as a collective choice, still reinforces a highly individualized narrative as a result. In workplace environments, employers are more likely to trivialize negative feelings and redirect conversations to silver linings without addressing the root concern (Culture Partners, 2024). Lack of empathy from leaders may, over time, decrease the willingness of participants to voice feedback entirely. By replacing negative criticism with false reassurances, Toxic

Positivity enables leaders to maintain appearances without spending resources on improving conditions. In practice, this would take the form of emotion management for employees and students without managing workloads or the material inputs for extreme pressure.

This essay contributes to the current understanding of toxic positivity by comparing findings in social sciences with neuroscientific explanatory models. Despite its social significance, toxic positivity occurs mostly as a concept in popular psychology and is often light in developing empirical and scientific evidence to back up the findings. Undoubtedly, one major limitation is the nascent status of the literature, which means the theoretical grounding that must necessarily prefigure IRB approval and other clinical approaches. This paper aims to help alleviate this burden by drawing connections between classroom environment theory and empirical findings in neuroscience, allowing the emergent concepts in Toxic Positivity to have greater scientific explanations. Backing Toxic Positivity with neuroscience enables the foundation of analytic critique without turning students into experimental subjects. Critically, seeking additional scientifically-backed explanations better allows the concept of toxic positivity to be testable. From those foundations, there can also be critiques that focus on more specific questions regarding the specific falsifiable and measurable neural mechanisms rather than broad observations of social phenomena. Finally, a constant issue with education studies is that because of its perceived lack of rigor, it is often overlooked by more science-driven STEM fields. Backing up a popular psychology concept with neuroscience findings elevates consideration of this humanities subject.

In this essay, I examine three core principles and implications of toxic positivity through the lens of neuroscience. First, the backlash of expressive suppression as an emotional regulation strategy towards negativity; Second, the obsessions towards best case scenario optimizing; Third, the prioritization of a positive mental narrative over constructive and informational feedback. Then, I will provide two case studies in which the concepts of toxic positivity will be contextualized and its consequences analyzed.

METHODOLOGY

This paper was first inspired by an extended discussion during an extracurricular club where I heard the phrase “toxic positivity” outside of academic context. Initial searches for the phrase returned a hodgepodge of articles without a clear organizing directive. One of the core goals of this paper is to contribute to the settling of “toxic positivity” as a topic of study by analytically linking popular press, social scientific, and neuroscientific research. Towards that end, three categories of information are included in this paper: the existing concepts of Positive Psychology that are applied in educational settings, the emergent critique of toxic positivity derived from a wealth of popular press and nascent scholastic sources, and neuroscientific concepts related to feedback mechanisms and emotional well being in educational settings.

The concept of “toxic positivity” is looked for both in popular literature like Psychology Today and Washington Post, and in scholarly databases through Google Scholar, JSTOR, Project MUSE, COMM and Mass Media Complete, and LexisNexis. As the concept of “toxic positivity” is not yet settled in

academic parlance, initial searches used the term of art in quotes (e.g. “Toxic Positivity”, “Toxic” w/5 “Positivity”). While constructing an annotated bibliography I identified subtopic discussion patterns and created a list for further search, including: the negative consequences of emotional suppression, the obsession towards best case scenario optimizing and prioritization of a positive narrative over constructive feedback. Accordingly, the original concepts of positive psychology that these phenomena may have originated from were searched for through science scholarship outlets (Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost, LexisNexis), which centered around prominent positive psychologists such as Martin Seligman.

The neuroscience concepts were found through science-focused scholarly databases such as ScienceDirect and National Institute of Health. The timeframe of the studies are centered around the last 5 years and no earlier than the last 10 years. Categories of studies used include empirical studies with laboratory settings relevant to the topic of interest, meta-analysis articles, and academic literature explaining brain concepts.

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION

The core “toxicity” of toxic positivity is its message that “the best or only way to cope with a bad situation is to put a positive spin on it and not dwell on the negative” (Chiu, 2020, para.6). Under this pressure, individuals may face cognitive dissonance that “can lead to emotional suppression, where negative emotions are ignored or invalidated to align with the externally imposed expectation of positivity” (Wyatt, 2024, p.2). Although positive psychology supporters may not intentionally uphold emotional suppression as an emotional regulation strategy, the environment it fosters pressures individuals to suppress emotions by “encouraging statements [that] are expected to minimize or eliminate painful emotions.” For example, one may be coached to think, “I’m feeling sad but I shouldn’t be sad because a lot of people have it worse than me”(Petrow, 2025, para.25). Broad surveys of research on emotional suppression reveal a pattern of negative outcomes to emotional suppression, often described as “ineffective, taxing, and maladaptive”; Suppression of negative emotions often leads to “a worsened mood...continued negative emotions, and even diminished positive emotion,” taxing individuals physically and mentally (Goodman, 2022, p.24) . Suppression “requires a lot of energy” and “leaves [people] feeling exhausted” (Goodman, 2022, p. 149). Under such environments, although people may exhibit less negative emotions on the surface, negativity does not go away. Instead, the suppressed negativity not only causes decreased wellbeing and increased stress on a personal level, but also stifles dissent and stagnates corrective measures in communities.

Ample neuroscientific evidence supports the negative physiological consequences of emotional suppression, inducing a perceived loss of control and increased stress levels. The major expression is the heightened physical reactions to stress. It has been found that “suppression increases arousal of multiple stress response systems...above the influence of the stressor itself” (Tyra et al., 2024, pp.14-15). This indicates that, when individuals are required to suppress emotions in a stressful situation, their stress level exceeds that typically induced by the stressor. Participant responses through laboratory stress tasks exhibit

that “the effort required to suppress during a highly stressful situation leads to increased blood pressure and/or total peripheral resistance (TPR)” (Tyra et al., 2024, p.15). When an individual is overwhelmed to suppress emotions, the body enters a defensive mode through mechanisms such as vasoconstriction and decreasing cardiac efficiency drops, characteristics of TPR. This symptom of maladaptive stress indicates that with emotional suppression, people enter the “threat state” under stress, or the state in which individuals perceive having inadequate resources to cope with the situation. While both threat state and challenge state—when individuals perceive to have abundant resources to cope with a situation—exhibit arousal of the SAM axis (Sympathetic-Adreno-Medullary axis), only threat state mobilizes the HPA (Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal) axis towards metabolic alterations (Tyra et al., 2024, p.17; Seery, 2011). The HPA axis responds to stressors by increasing cortisol level to prioritize energy to survive an immediate situation and alters metabolism so that the brain and the heart is prioritized in glucose reception (Godoy et al., 2018). This theory is corroborated by how “manipulation of suppression was related to greater HPA-axis reactivity to laboratory stressors” (Tyra et al., 2024, p.13). Emotional suppression, by inducing the heightened HPA activity, contributes to an intensified response to stress. Thus, one potential explanation for this phenomenon is that emotional suppression induces TPR, which mobilizes the HPA axis through putting individuals under the “threat state”, resulting in a heightened response to stress.

Another negative result of emotional suppression as a regulation strategy is the decrease in one’s ability for reward anticipation. Individuals utilizing expressive suppression as an emotional regulation strategy feels less positive about them receiving a reward, as evidenced by “elevated emotion suppression was associated with blunted reward responsivity” (Kelley et al., 2019, p. 26). This is further proven by EEG neuroimaging, that “greater suppression tendencies were associated with reduced reward-related neural activity...as reflected in a blunted SPN” (Kelley et al., 2019, p.27). The stimulus-preceding negativity (SPN) is an EEG signal that reflects how much the brain is anticipating upcoming feedback. SPN is deeper and more pronounced when expecting a reward, and its intensity is positively correlated with uncertainty and personal relevance. The brain only fires when an individual does not know what the outcome would be (Walentowska et al., 2018). A blunted SPN signifies the decreased anticipation of a rewarding result or feedback post-emotional suppression. Emotional suppression is a “later, response-focused, emotional-regulation strategy” that is for “modulating emotional responses after they have been initiated”. After response initiation, “suppression tendencies begin to exert their effect in the form of blunted reward outcome anticipation” (Kelley et al., 2019, p.16). In other words, emotional suppression tries to suppress emotions after they have already been triggered. Thus, because of the mental effort required for the continuous suppression, the brain’s curiosity and ability to anticipate rewards are dampened.

A culture of toxic positivity strongly encourages emotional suppression to ensure that negative emotions are not expressed outwardly. Two potential negative consequences could be identified through neuroscience evidence. First, the act of actively suppressing negative expression diverts the energy and resources that are otherwise utilized for problem solving through activation of the physiologic stress

pathways. The individual would experience less perceived ability to deal with stressful situations, consequently inducing and amplifying stress. Second, individuals may stop expressing negativity on the surface, but in reality they have become more pessimistic—that their ability to expect rewarding feedback or results is weakened. Suggested by the blunted SPN, instead of experiencing uncertainty and anticipation of a reward when in the process of feedback, they would assume non-rewarding feedback. These findings align with the descriptors used to describe toxic positivity in popular literature, including its taxing requirement of energy and decreased wellbeing.

BEST CASE SCENARIO OPTIMIZING

A core emphasis of positive psychology has been the orientation towards positivity and optimism away from any negativity in education settings. This trend originates in the proposal of “learned optimism”, which argues that strategies of challenging negative beliefs and experiencing positive emotions can influence positive outcomes (Seligman, 1991; Seligman, 2004). When carried on to an educational setting, schools are encouraged to teach happiness in centering around three realms: the pleasant life, experiencing hedonistic positive emotions; the engaged life, where a person are completely at one with what they are doing, and the meaningful life, identifying one’s signature strengths (Seligman et al., 2009).

A noticeable trend has emerged in positivity movements, where initial arguments connecting positivity and wellbeing escalate through inversion and has the “tendency to undervalue negative emotional experiences and overvalue positive ones” (Chiu, 2020, para.6). This mindset creates a perception of positivity as a “cure-all” solution, while negative emotions are viewed as unproductive, if not harmful (Wyatt, 2024, p.1). This phenomenon eventually culminates into an environment in which negative feedback such as criticisms are devalued and discouraged in favor of positive feedback and affirmations. This narrative of encouraging positivity at all costs is not unmet with criticisms. Rather than steering away from negativity, “acknowledg[ing] both positive and negative aspects of situations, is more effective for long-term mental health than forced positivity” (Wyatt, 2024, p.4). This could be explained by that the way of thinking with toxic positivity “hinders our ability to problem-solve...to get crucial support, and to...draw meaning from an experience.” (Petrov, 2025, para.26). In other words, the acknowledgement of negative experiences and negative feedback has value in fully comprehending an experience, seeking help and problem-solving. Toxic positivity denounces that value.

Neuroscientific studies find that negative feedback acts as a corrective tool, especially in learning environments. The human brain is built to learn from errors: the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) plays a crucial role in reinforcement learning, serving the purpose of error detection and development of behavior adjustment strategies. It is found that negative emotions, pain, and cognitive control all activate this same region, which links emotions to actions through the ACC’s connection with motor regions and the prefrontal cortex (Shackman et al., 2011). The induction of aversion by negative feedback stimulates the ACC, which is “responsible for deploying cognitive resources to evaluate the error and initiate corrective actions”, activating “emotionally charged responses” as the amygdala and “cognitive control regions”

which are “involved in error evaluation and behavioral adjustments”. In other words, the reception of negative feedback not only stimulates unpleasant experiences, but also directs cognitive resources into evaluating the situation and adjusting the behavior to correct the errors. Specifically, the ACC emits signals through releasing brain waves of Error-Related Negativity (ERN) and Feedback-Related Negativity (FRN), which are sharp negative deflections in response to errors and are more pronounced following negative compared to positive feedback. Greater ERN and FRN are found to correlate with corrective behaviors. When “cognitive salience” (the conflict between goals and errors) is high, ERN and FRN increase (Kim and Shin, 2025, pp.3-4; Hauser et al., 2014). This implicates that a strong failure of achieving intended goals can potentially provide a greater corrective learning experience.

Moreover, the cognitive circuit formed through negative feedback is in fact, more effective at improving results for anxious individuals than positive feedback. Anxious individuals, contrary to the typical brain, have a reduced FRN amplitude to negative feedback, implicating that they “expect negative rather than positive feedback”. Because the amplitude of FRN represents the deviation between actual and expected feedback, the decreased FRN amplitude “suggests that anxious individuals perceive less of a difference between expected and received negative feedback” (Jones et al., 2020, p.84; Hauser et al., 2014). Anxious individuals are more likely to “adopt negative bias when learning via reinforcement”, leading to a negative bias that “cause[s] less subjective conflict between the expected negative and the actual feedback received” (Jones et al., 2020, p.84). Because the anxious brain is accustomed to internal negative feedback, there is less cognitive dissonance between expectations and reality when receiving external negative feedback, and therefore anxious individuals are more likely to accept and incorporate criticism. Negative bias allows them to activate the “No-Go pathway”, an avoidance learning pathway activated by a dip in dopamine levels (Frank et al., 2005). While the typical brain relies on unfamiliar spikes of FRN to induce corrective behavior, the anxious brain prefers feedback which conflicts less with what they expect. Thus, negative feedback is better incorporated by individuals with anxiety.

The neuroscientific findings indicate that as a general principle, negative emotions can play a critical role in stimulating corrective behaviors in the brain through inducing brain activities signalling discrepancies between intended goal and current actions. To resolve the tension, the brain attempts to refine and rationalize the discrepancies which induces performance improvement. Overemphasis on positivity strips away the negative feedback. In these environments, the lack of exposure to negative stimuli can lead to individuals being unaware of the discrepancies between goals and actions, stifling actions for self improvements. Specifically for anxious individuals, the emphasis on ensuring positivity not only fails to decrease anxiety, but also risks failures in incorporating feedback effectively as a whole from these individuals. In environments with toxic positivity, there frequently exists “negative feedback embedded in positive feedback, or by negative feedback being phrased in a positive way”, which causes “a subjective perception of similarity between positive and negative feedback information” (Jones et al., 2020, p.86). Anxiety is often triggered by poor performances, and the positive feedback received by anxious individuals conflicts with the perception from their own negatively biased self evaluation, eventually making it harder for anxious individuals to accept and consider the feedback. Thus, a piece of feedback of mixed positivity and negativity can potentially lead to a cognitive blur, that when positive and negative

feedback is blended together, it is more difficult for especially anxious individuals to identify each from the other. In turn, under these conditions, anxious individuals are unable to productively incorporate even the negative parts of the feedback that they would otherwise deem useful.

EMOTION AND FEEDBACK

Another important argument in positive psychology is Self-Affirmation Theory, which highlights the importance of the role of affirmations on individuals. During times of failures and negativity, ego protection necessitates reducing the impact of a specific situation of failure on a person's overall self evaluation (Sherman, 2013; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). The strategy to achieve this is through zooming out from a specific instance of failure or frustration in favor of a higher level self-perspective. Through focusing on the overarching values and identities of themselves, which are often abstract, people orient away from the specific contextual difficulties to maintain self integrity (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009).

Feedback with the intent to encourage or to restore confidence may try to utilize the strategies proposed in Self-Affirmation Theory, however, if these strategies are applied inconsiderately, causes “highly symbolic yet shallow statements in response to...statements of distress.” Usually, these statements use the “X is Y construct” to attribute a narrative to a concept, as in “courage is power”, or “tomorrow is another day”, which leaves “little or no strategic manoeuvring space” (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022, pp.3, 7). Here, rather than specific, constructive comments, feedback is delivered in “generalized, emotional phrases,” such identifying a “bad attitude” or claiming the actor “didn’t try hard enough” (Goodman, 2022, p.5). The prioritization of emotional positivity causes feedback to focus too much on painting a highly symbolic narrative of positivity which sacrifices constructive and specific feedback that can be implemented as a solution. These narratives are usually designed to counter the negativity expressed in the seeker of feedback, however, emotions “act as internal signals that guide our choices by attaching feelings to potential outcomes.” Negative feelings are crucial for correcting our choices for aversive learning, and when people “override these signals in favour of a mental narrative...we cut ourselves off from valuable feedback” (Davies, 2025). By providing these narratives, feedback receivers are directed to changing their perception towards the problem, rather than solving the problem itself. “Rushing quickly into positivity” makes people “unable to understand...the pain points” (Goodman, 2022, pp. 53-54).

Findings from neuroscience further explain the process of emotional narrativization. Prioritization of emotional narratives leads to a diminution in informational feedback, as measured by Mu rhythm. Mu rhythm (8-13 Hz in adults), measured by EEG, is an electrical activity over the sensorimotor cortex in which the neurons fire synchronously together, creating a strong wave. During an action execution or the observation of others action, the electrical patterns desynchronizes and exhibits a drop in amplitude, known as mu suppression (Fox et al., 2016). It is found that mu suppression is exhibited as a response for empathetic concern, an affective response of compassion towards others (DiGirolamo et al., 2019). Studying empathy in relation to feedback, it is found that “giving feedback diminishes cognitive empathy but not emotional empathy” (Hung et al., 2024, p. 10). This suggests that giving feedback suppresses

Empathetic Accuracy (EA), or the cognitive ability to judge and analyze the situation and feelings of another person (Rum & Perry, 2020). However, consistently we find that Emotional Contagion (EC) and Emotional Intensity (EI), the depth and accuracy in experiencing the emotions, are not affected (Taiwo et al. 2021; Clark et al., 2019). This suggests that when the listener is preoccupied with displaying the correct emotional feedback, they become less accurate in reading the actual situation. This can be explained by "a high cognitive load can reduce one's capacity for top-down mentalizing and caregiving intention while the automatic/bottom-up emotional component of empathy remains unaffected" (Hung et al., 2024, p.11; Henry et al., 2023). When an individual is required to perform both emotional and feedback labor, the high cognitive load trades off with subject empathy and caregiving. Independently, it appears that "sadness is less contagious and harder to judge accurately than is happiness", and people are "more willing to engage in positive conversations" (Hung et al., 2024, p.11). This reveals a subconscious positive bias, that people are inherently worse at empathizing with negative emotions, implicating that displaying empathetic feedback to negative output takes up a higher emotional toll. The finding that "under the negative emotion condition, empathizers with low cognitive empathy exhibit high mu suppression in the sensorimotor regions only while listening non-reactively" (Hung et al., 2024, p.9) similarly implicates that people who exhibit worse abilities to empathize are much more likely to even attempt empathy when not required to give feedback.

Feedback seekers prioritize the constructive value of feedback over emotional comfort, thus, feedback of a positive narrative fails to provide positive assistance to the feedback seeker. It is posited that feedback seeking is determined by the feedback's "net informational value. This consists of "instrumental utility", whether the feedback aids in gaining rewards or avoiding punishment, and "hedonic utility", the feedback's impact on the affective state (Sharot & Sunstein., 2020). To investigate which component is weighed more in the decision, it is found that individuals "displayed higher likelihoods of purchasing feedback on trials where they reported lower confidence in their response accuracy", suggesting that the primary motivation of feedback seeking is "to verify response accuracy when they are unsure about whether they made the right choice" (Cagna et al., 2024, p.9). Prioritization of "rational" factors like low confidence indicates that the instrumental utility is valued highly, therefore the specific feedback that provides commentary and correction on the low-confidence choices will be more salient to the receiver. On the other hand, "emotional responses to feedback...did not predict participants' willingness to buy feedback", and "negative emotional responses to negative feedback did not impact feedback purchases" (Cagna et al., 2024, p.9). This suggests that instead of the hedonic utility of the feedback, people weigh the cognitive aspects of receiving feedback more. Thus, the potential value of feedback for future gains acts as a stronger motivator for criticism-seeking than immediate pleasure or avoiding discomfort born out of negativity.

The neuroscientific analysis provides a possible explanation for the lack of effectiveness in responses with toxic positivity. Toxic positivity emphasizes the mental comfortability of the feedback, leading to feedback givers focusing on displaying the correct emotional response to the target's negative emotions. In this situation, the emphasis is on the hedonic utility of feedback through symbolic and emotional responses. According to the tradeoff of mental resources, it can be inferred that fewer mental resources

are available to deploy to cognitive assessments for the instrumental utility, or the critical and constructive feedback. This scenario is directly antithetical to what feedback seekers usually want, which is to receive tools necessary for improvement. Instead, “foregoing the temptation to provide verbal feedback could be beneficial to the processing of negative emotions in the target” (Hung et al., 2024, p.12). This means that the empathizers, when providing feedback, should not comment on the negative emotional states but rather focus their feedback on practical aspects such as areas of improvement on actions or decisions. These findings can potentially account for how toxic positivity inhibits effective feedback circulation, in which the emphasis on emotional expressions induces a lack of informative feedback that a listener needs.

CASE STUDIES

This section provides two stylized examples that draw from the experiences of students in highly competitive high school environments. The following examples are fictionalized, hypothetical scenarios synthesized for conceptual illustration rather than empirical evidence. Both scenarios are drawn from a pastiche of stories both public and private. While neither scenario offers meaningful quantitative data, they serve as models to demonstrate the effectiveness of toxic positivity critique in competitive educational settings. By identifying the features of toxic positivity, these examples show how toxic positivity can emerge as an environmental influence and the downstream effects of that condition on participants within a milieu.

Scenario 1: Competitive Feedback

A new member of the debate team is achieving success at smaller tournaments but is continuously unsuccessful at larger invitationals. The debater is discouraged because they put in as many hours of research and practice as their peers achieving more success. They are also frustrated because they are good at formulating arguments on the spot but struggle to present them clearly. They are struggling to bridge success at the local level to larger spaces and worry they have hit a wall in their ability to progress independently. They want to know where they can improve their debate skills, so they sent an email to a much more experienced captain:

“I thought I was doing okay at locals, but the losses at the recent invitational really made me think I wasn’t doing well. I put in as much effort as other people who did better than me and I don’t know what abilities I lack. Judges have criticized my speaking style and I’m trying to work on that. What else do you think I can do to improve?”

The captain, hoping to encourage the member and improve their confidence, answers with a short email:

“Do not beat yourself up! Although your speaking style can be strengthened, you have undoubtedly improved so much since the beginning of the year. Invitationals are much more competitive than local tournaments and your experience is very common among novices. Don’t

lose confidence in yourself and be proud of what you have accomplished. Keep working hard and doing what you're doing and very soon you'll win at an invitational!"

The captain believes this email will direct the debater to improve on their own by finding a program that fits their needs and abilities. The captain is hesitant to include further directions because they are not sure how much free time the student has to prepare, and they are worried that offering an overly rigorous training schedule will only discourage the debater from trying. Furthermore, the captain fears a harsher, more detailed approach may be misunderstood by the debater as unnecessary criticism or create an interpersonal rift that would harm the social balance of the team. By focusing on broad encouragement, the captain hopes the debater will feel heard without being belittled or dismissed.

The response of the captain exhibits several components of toxic positivity: allaying negative emotion, prioritizing symbolic advice, and disingenuous reassurances.

First, it allays negative emotions and prioritizes reappraising negativity over exploring the causes and solutions to it. The novice is currently experiencing the tension of the discrepancies of their intended goal and current action. They identified tensions such as putting a lot of effort but not achieving expected success and room for improvements in speaking styles. They seek help from the captain for self improvement induced by the tension. Although the captain didn't outright tell the novice to not feel negatively, they simplified the specific negative stimulations as "beating yourself up" or "losing confidence", common negative emotions perceived as dysfunctional. Rather than exploring the specific negative feedback received from tournaments and figuring out solutions, the captain's indication is to instead reappraise the negative emotions, cutting off room for further conversation digging into the reasons of frustration that allows for more specific and practical feedback for actual self improvement.

Second, the captain's response replaces negative criticism with disingenuous reassurances of a winning future that are not based on critically evaluating the member's performance. More detailed discussions about critically assessing the root causes of the novice's poor performances may create pessimism on the lack of certain abilities of the novice. Because of the potential proliferation of negative emotions, these uncomfortable discussions might be seen as antithetical to the positive culture promoted by toxic positivity.

Lastly, the response emphasizes on decreasing anxiety for the novice by presenting a high level mental narrative that failure is normalized. The way the response is given indicates what the novice is doing is correct, for the captain wants to decrease the anxiety of the novice for being dissatisfied with the status quo. Although the captain's intention is to improve the novice's confidence, the prioritization of the mental resources to ensure the message is emotionally uplifting tradeoffs with the practicality of the feedback. The novice's anxiety from losing leads them to have a negative bias during reinforcement learning and therefore more likely to absorb feedback that aligns with their perception of their situation as being unsuccessful. In this instance, critical feedback pointing out what the novice is doing wrong will, counterintuitively, be well received by the novice. The captain's strategy of phrasing negative feedback

along with positive ones, pairing the novice's room of improvement in speaking style with them improving, would be especially ineffective in this case because the novice would experience a cognitive blur that makes them unable to clearly isolate the critical, negative feedback. Meanwhile, as the member actively seeks feedback, they are looking for critical suggestions rather than emotional comfort. The response would likely only induce limited assurance, but leaves the novice more confused as they fail to receive feedback of practicality.

Scenario 2: Opening Day Assembly

In the opening of the new students orientation day of a prestigious private high school, the Head of school makes the following speech:

“The school is a community that cultivates belonging through a welcoming environment that values diversity and encourages engagement. At the school, everyone can find a community they can belong in and we encourage students to approach every experience with curiosity and wonder. Students describe our clubs and groups to be one of the most inclusive, vibrant, and fun communities to be a part of.”

The Head wishes that through this speech, they can establish the core values of the school of kindness, inclusivity and curiosity, as well as foster a sense of belonging and comfortability to the incoming students and to encourage them to interact with people and explore different activities when they are on campus. The purpose of this speech is to give a warm welcome to the new students and to help them get excited for the school year.

However, although given without malicious intent, the speech can indirectly create an environment of toxic positivity on an institutional level by exhibiting the components of dismissal of negative feedback and preemptive suppression of dissent.

Through applying labels of positive qualities as “belonging”, “vibrant”, and “fun”, the school, as the authority, sets a baseline expectation for the average school experience. The speech creates a sense of the collective ethos of belonging, inclusivity and vibrance, creating a false sense of harmony. This leads to the phenomenon that any negative experience sounds like an exception or misunderstanding. Psychologist Tabitha Kirkland explains that toxic positivity “dismisses emotions instead of affirming them” and often comes “from a place of discomfort” that confuses our internal emotional orientation with what is best for the collective. The reasoning is that what may be uncomfortable for *me* will be uncomfortable for *everyone*, and thus expressions of negativity are perceived (by speaker and receiver) as essentially selfish because they put the needs of the expresser above the wellbeing of the group (Princing, 2021).

When students go through negative experiences, they may reflect upon this ethos and doubt their own judgement for being antithetical to what the school claims to uphold. The chilling effect on dissent is automatic, and self-perpetuating. For example, a student does not feel belonged because of the already existing cliques, but they are unwilling to complain up and down the chain. They perceive their peers as

mostly happy and harmonious and in accordance with the school ethos, and worry that they are perceived as the odd one out and viewed as lacking in social abilities. They are also pressured to complain to teachers, for the establishment of the baseline indicates that any experience that deviates from the baseline will have to be justified with an extra burden of proof. They would feel pressured to express that to peers or teachers because of the worry that their experience is perceived as an individualized accident. They also fear bearing the burden of proof that this is a valid problem rather than them not being “engaging” enough. For guidance counselors, they may fear the disruptions complaints or negative feedback would cause that breaks the harmonious image of the institution as well.

Because of the lack of room for expression of negative emotions, students may turn to expressive suppression as an emotional regulation strategy, which would strongly harm their wellbeing. Repeated emotional suppression can make them enter the “stress state” and perceive themselves as lacking resources to face this situation. In this case, because of the pressure they face to complain externally, they will perceive themselves as unable to actually resolve the social situation they are facing that the only option is expressive suppression. In turn, they are also likely becoming more reserved for emotional suppression blunts reward anticipation. This can be exhibited through that they would stop trying to blend in when entering other organizations because they no longer anticipate a positive response.

DISCUSSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

I have argued, using neuroscientific reasoning, that the constant pressure of suppressing and reframing negative stimuli could be maladaptive as an emotional regulation strategy, interfering with stress management, reinforcement learning and feedback processing. This finding aligns with the emergent field of Toxic Positivity to suggest that communicative, cooperative, and educational environments are vulnerable to the imposition of social frameworks that overemphasize emotion management over other inputs for growth or harmony.

Emotional suppressions appear to alter rather than eliminate response to negative stimuli: diverting neural resources to suppress negative suppression causes the perception of a lack of resources to deal with the stimuli, putting an individual into the “threat state” and activating HPA axis with an increased physiological mobilization. Suppression also diverts mental resources away from the capability of anticipating future rewards, suggested by a reduced FRN. Reinforcement learning studies demonstrate that neural signals such as ERN and FRN direct attention to discrepancies, inducing corrective responses.

These findings in neuroscience offer possible insights for Toxic Positivity. First, they suggest there is an instrumental value of negative stimuli and feedback for active feedback seekers, which implies an overemphasis on emotion management will be perceived as either unhelpful or counterproductive. Furthermore, there is a cognitive tradeoff at work: if the feedback provider’s focus is on processing the feedback receiver’s emotional state and constructing emotional appropriate responses, it potentially reduces the ability to provide constructive and informational feedback. Especially for anxious individuals,

ambiguous feedback causes cognitive dissonance and limits the ability to induce corrective behaviors. These mechanisms combined put individuals into a vicious cycle of distorted adaptive mechanisms with decreased constructive information.

It is worth acknowledging that although these findings provide potential neural explanations of critiques towards toxic positivity, they should not be treated as direct validation. Most studies are done in laboratory settings with isolated mechanisms such as expressive suppression or feedback delivery, instead of in an environment with sustained requirement for positivity. The present framework should be treated as an inferential mechanism bridging studied neuroscientific mechanisms and a broader social phenomenon. Future research should focus on examining the proposed topics and mechanisms such as ACC activity, HPA-axis activation and SPN directly while manipulating a setting similar to that of toxic positivity. As research in feedback neuroscience develops, the assumptions used in this essay will similarly require reexamination. Finally, social science theories used as foundations for our understanding of classroom management goals and expectations may also adapt with the advent of increased digital learning.

CONCLUSION

With the increased emphasis on emotional management in pedagogical studies, toxic positivity is the next stage in refinement as researchers and educators seek to balance emotion management and intellectual growth. Environments that prioritize emotional contentment over dynamic management strategies may inevitably yield less insightful and impactful feedback, with downstream effects of stifled dissent, decreased wellbeing through emotional suppression, and a lack of self-improvement. Shown through the two case studies, toxic positivity is not limited to the classroom. It can occur in any community, individually or societally, including interpersonally, in student groups, and as a part of school-wide culture.

This study proposes a preliminary explanation of the effects of toxic positivity based on previous neuroscientific findings. Future research is required to examine toxic positivity as a measurable construct. Studies should directly construct a controlled environment exhibiting features of toxic positivity to investigate if these environments produce measurable changes in emotional suppression, feedback processing, or willingness to express dissent.

The framework of Toxic Positivity established in this paper may also be further developed through interdisciplinary critique from pedagogical, rhetorical, and communicative approaches. Pedagogical critique may contribute to classroom effects, management strategies, practical and theoretical educational tools for uptake. From rhetoric, scholars could examine texts of speeches, programs, and training manuals to identify origins of toxic positivity in persuasive messages. Communication studies may broadly contribute through analysis of interpersonal messages and organizational communication strategies that carry forth toxic positivity.

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