

Whitney Goodman Toxic Positivity

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That was Whitney Goodman on psychologists off. The clock

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Jill Stoddard: I'm here with you, Elle, to introduce today's [00:02:00] episode with Whitney Goodman, where we talk about toxic positivity. And this episode was really well timed for me. It was, it was eye opening honestly, because it made me realize that with all the incredibly difficult things that have been going on in the world over recent years, , I think that I've been a little bit guilty.

Maybe like wanting or needing more positivity in, in my life. And anyway, it made me really stop and, and wonder if, given that relationships are incredibly important to me and It really matters to me to be able to show up for people I care about when they're having a hard time. , so it just got me thinking a lot. And I'm wondering what your reaction to the episode was.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, I think it's such an important conversation to be talking about toxic positivity cuz it, it's not that positivity in and of itself is problematic. It's problematic when we can't make space for what's hard. And I think what you're pointing to is something that so many people feel. So I'm glad that you shared it, [00:03:00] which is life has been really, really hard.

And so it may in part be that we're drawn to toxic positivity because we're just so tired of all the hard things. The other thing it makes me think of though, Jill, is you and Whitney later in the episode, talk about help rejecting complainers and how hard it is to listen to people who are having a hard time but just aren't able to kind of turn the page, you know, if they vent and share what's hard.

They kind of feel stuck there. And if you listen compassionately, um, for a time, and then are, you're ready to kind of move on to think about, you know, for example, if you're in the therapist role, okay, And, and so what can we do? What are lessons learned? What can we make from this? How can we grow that certain individuals?

Take a lot longer sometimes based on circumstance to be ready to move forward. And that can be hard to be in the listening role. And so it got me thinking about this fine art that we have of being [00:04:00] therapists and sort of doing that piece of validation and offering compassion and this sort of, Sense

that we develop as therapist of when, when we are ready to kind of push somebody into figuring out and what do we do with it.

And I, I think it's one of these things that's really hard, even as a therapist to figure out when to push versus when to kind of sit in that compassionate listening role.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, and if it's hard for us as therapists, imagine how hard it is for people who don't have the same kind of training that we do. But I do think that there are just very, Human ways to show up and attend to whether a conversation is what someone needs or not. So for example, , , active listening, noticing someone's body language, does it, does it seem like they're kind of turning their head away or not making eye contact?

Or are they leaning forward and nodding their head? You know, you can pay attention to people's signals. , or one of the things Whitney talks about is you can ask. You know, you can say like, Gosh, this sounds really [00:05:00] challenging. I can see exactly why you would feel this way. Would it be helpful to brainstorm some potential solutions or do you feel like you just need me to listen right now?

I think where it gets tricky and maybe the case with the more sort of chronic help rejecting complainers. if there's a real function to the complaining itself and it doesn't ever kind of turn to problem solving and, and just having this conversation now, you're really making me realize, I think that's where my bandwidth gets low and where I struggle and maybe wanna like, you know, turn the volume up on the positivity.

, people will sometimes say to me, I can't, How could you be a therapist? I can't imagine listening to people complain all day. I'm like, No, no. That's a real misconception about therapy because people aren't complaining. They're coming and saying, I'm stuck. Something's not working. Help me figure out what I need to do to change and be proactive to make my life better.

I can sit and do that. All day, every day. It's almost more like in my personal life, if [00:06:00] I have people like I, It's a silly example, but I joke, if you come to me and you complain incessantly about your bad haircut, at some point I'm gonna be like, Oh my God. Then go fix it. Like go get, right? It's like, well, this is your problem that you can solve.

Like maybe there doesn't have to be quite so much negativity without action, if that makes sense.

Yael Schonbrun: But then it sort of gets to this question. I mean, you sort of said the function of the complaining, I think even in our non therapy relationships and maybe especially in those non therapy relationships, to get curious for yourself. Maybe even depose the question of, it sounds like you're really unhappy and not ready to make a change.

I wonder why.

Jill Stoddard: Mm.

Yael Schonbrun: And I do think, I mean, just as an aside for all those mental health professionals listening in, it is very hard to not step into, , supportive problem solving mode as a therapist because that is what we do for a living. But I think. It's something that I [00:07:00] think about a lot to sort of leave my therapist hat off when I'm in my, , husband, wife relationship or when I'm with my friends.

Because typically in those relationships, people just want a supportive year. , they're not coming to me for help the way that they are in therapy.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, and the main thing that we talk about in the episode is, , the best way to be able to show up for that is to make room for our own discomfort. Effort with people's struggles. Like, so this is the part of the the origin of toxic positivity is I feel uncomfortable when you share your pain.

And in order for me to feel better, I'm gonna sell you platitudes. Like it's all good, you know, keep calm, carry on, whatever those things are. And that. In validating and creates disconnection. , and that if we can learn how to sit with our own discomfort, even with help rejecting complainers and make space for that and focus on the, the connection, the friendship, the relationship, whatever it is that's, that's important.

, you know, that that's one way that we can [00:08:00] overcome the, problems with toxic positivity.

Yael Schonbrun: It makes me think of the parenting advice that when your kid is having a really hard time, even if it makes no sense to you, that. Less helpful responses. You don't have a reason to cry or everything will be fine, or don't worry, don't be sad. Right. And because that is about your own discomfort exactly as you and Whitney talked about.

And I think that is why this toxic positivity idea is so helpful in so many of our relationships and our friendships and our therapeutic relationships and our parenting relationships in our partnerships. When we notice that response of trying to shut down discomfort to really get curious about, you know, whose discomfort is it that we're trying to shut down, and if it's ours to maybe get curious about that.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, exactly. Well, we hope you get a lot out of this episode with Whitney Goodman.

Hey everybody, it's Jill here and I'm really excited about our guest today, [00:09:00] Whitney Goodman, who wrote a new book about toxic positivity. And you may be familiar with Whitney. She has a very popular Instagram account called Sit With Wit, so I can't wait to have this conversation today. Whitney Goodman, 1 m f t, is the radically honest psychotherapist behind the hugely popular Instagram account at.

Whit. She's also an author and the owner of the Collaborative Counseling Center, a virtual therapy practice in Florida. Whitney's debut book, Toxic Positivity, Keeping it real in a world obsessed with being happy shows readers how to shift the goal from being happy to being authentic in order to live fully a millennial on a quest to make mental health information accessible and easy to understand.

Whitney helps people who want to improve their relationships and emotional wellness. She earned her undergrad degree at Tulane University and a graduate degree in counseling psychology from the University of Miami. Whitney has a column in Psychology Today and has been featured in several publications, including the New York Times, [00:10:00] Teen Vogue, New York Magazine, and good Morning America.

Whitney, welcome. I'm so happy to have you here on Psychologists Off the Clock.

Whitney Goodman: Hi. Thank you for having me.

Jill Stoddard: Of course. ,

so , , let's jump in. So the book is about toxic positivity. So it seems like the right place to start is what is toxic positivity. And can you give, , a few examples for us?

Whitney Goodman: Toxic positivity is the unrelenting pressure to be happy or positive no matter what the circumstances are, and it's something that we can use against ourselves and other people. So some examples of that would be when anyone is struggling or going through a hard time, we meet them with something like, just look on the bright side.

Everything happens for a reason. All gonna work out. You have nothing to worry about. And we can also do this to ourselves, right? Of saying things like, Gosh, I should just be grateful. , I need to just be more positive whenever we are [00:11:00] struggling with something.

Jill Stoddard: , it seems like this is something that has beco, it's just like, sort of exploded maybe, especially with social media and the growth of kind of like, quote unquote wellness experts or gurus , who may or may not actually be experts or gurus.

Um, so how can positivity, So I think most of us think of positivity as a good thing, right? Like, shouldn't I be positive and optimistic and thi So how is it that it can be toxic? Like, talk to us a little bit about what happens when people either say, it's all good, don't worry about it, or we do that thing to ourselves.

I should just be more grateful. What, what, what are the repercussions of.

Whitney Goodman: I think you're so right about social media. We live in a very black and white world, and that tends to be where our thinking goes. And so we assume if it positively can become toxic, then we should just be negative and there is this middle ground, right? And so what happens when we use positivity in [00:12:00] a way that is not beneficial for us?

We end up suppress. Our emotions, which we know is not an effective long term strategy, right? To deny how you're feeling. Say it doesn't exist, pretend otherwise, those feelings are gonna show up. One way or another down the road, probably in a way that doesn't feel good. The other thing that happens is that it really inhibits connection between us and and other people.

Because if I feel like you are denying how I feel, you're telling me it's wrong, I'm not gonna go to you anymore and I'm going to suffer in silence. And I think that we see this on, on a. Bad scale when we think about people who are dying, you know, because of mental health issues, where they feel such a deep amount of shame.

, and this feeling of like, I'm the only one that's struggling with this because they're met with that positivity.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, absolutely. There, there's, I think the surgeon General, not too long ago, came out with a report about this [00:13:00] like epidemic of loneliness that people are experiencing, and that's what that makes me feel like is, you know, when you are brave enough to share that you're having a hard time and it's met with, it's all good, or at least this look on the bright side, you know that that can actually make people feel really alone and prevent them from sharing again in the future.

Whitney Goodman: Exactly.

Jill Stoddard: I also love that you say it's like a bandaid on a bullet wound, right? I mean that like that is so that's a great metaphor, and I think that's exactly right. And the other metaphor I think of is when you talk about emotional suppression and how it comes out one way or the other is. . Um, my co-hosts and I all do a therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is very consistent with the messages in your book.

And one of the metaphors is about like, you know, when you have a floating ball in a pool, like when you were a kid and you would try to get the ball under the water and it takes all your effort and energy and attention, it's hard to do, but eventually you can get it [00:14:00] under there, right? but what happens, it pops up a hundred percent of the time, and the further you push it down, the higher it flies up in the air.

And that this is, you know, kind of the metaphor for emotional suppression. That ball is gonna fly up and the further you stuff it, the more it's gonna come up. And what if we just sort of like let it float? And sometimes it'll be crashing into our heads and it'll be really, it'll be right there in our awareness.

Other times it'll be on the other side of the pool, but we're now freed up to use our arms and our legs in other ways because that emotional suppression often takes a lot of energy and effort and attention to try to, to, to do that and sustain it.

Whitney Goodman: So true. I love that metaphor.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. The other thing you talked about that is, you actually talked about some research in your book that this toxic positivity can like, it

works specifically can stunt creativity, which that was new to me. I hadn't really thought about that. Is that, Can you say more about that?

How does it stunt [00:15:00] creativity?

Whitney Goodman: Yeah, so there was a lot of interesting research on groupthink and how that can be promoted within the workplace and when people are subjected, , to that to. Type of culture, they really don't wanna do anything to step outside of the lines, right? Because there are repercussions for that, whether it's social stigma or getting fired.

, the other part with creativity is that when we are trained to not look for problems, we can't find solutions. And so what they found with a lot of work environments, especially in creative industries, marketing, et cetera, People need to look at the negative parts. You know, that's how we're getting new technology.

That's how we're, uh, you know, getting those like app updates on our phone and all of that is because somebody complained, um, or said, This isn't working for me. And I think we have to credit most of the big innovations in our world for somebody speaking up and saying, This could be better.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. Right, And, and you have to be [00:16:00] able to see the, the pain points. You know, if you have these like positivity blinders on, then you're not aware that there actually are these pain points that need to be addressed.

Whitney Goodman: Yes.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. So the flip side of this, of course, we'll talk much more about the toxic part of positivity, but the flip side of this is you do acknowledge that positivity can be a good thing.

So what does healthy non-toxic positivity look like? Like how is it different from toxic positivity?

Whitney Goodman: The best way to describe this I think, is using radical acceptance from dialectical behavioral therapy that we can hold space for conflicting. Things at the same time. Right? And we don't necessarily have to like it or accept it. So healthy positivity to me is saying, I acknowledge reality. I don't like this part, this part is hard.

Whatever it is, and I have hope for the future. And that things could get better. And bringing in that empowerment piece of like, how [00:17:00] can I utilize my resources, my skills, my abilities to improve things in some.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. I love that we enact, we talk a lot about workability, which is the idea that like, does whatever it is that I'm doing in this moment, does it, Does it help me move closer toward the person I wanna be, the life I want? , so if there is something that I'm choosing to shift my perspective on and have a more positive or optimistic outlook, and it's not having any of the costs of pos toxic positivity, I'm not suppressing my emotions, et cetera, um, and it's maybe even making it more likely that I'll engage with my values, then maybe that can be a good thing.

But really looking at that, like, almost like the function of it more than how it appears topographically, if that makes sense.

Whitney Goodman: Absolutely. Yeah, I think that's a great way of looking at.

Jill Stoddard: yeah. So this concept of toxic positivity has become, it, it's like [00:18:00] a little controversial. And so I'm curious what you think, like, why do you think, it seems to both resonate with so many people, myself included, but it also gets some weird pushback, right?

Like, so what? What do you think that's about?

Whitney Goodman: So I think we have to remember that like positive thinking is almost like a billion dollar industry that has been operating for a long time within the self-help and psychology space. I mean, early in my training, like that was really part of a lot of the rhetoric, right? Was changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts.

And so when people have been. I hate to use the word like indoctrinated, but really just like exposed to something continuously. Over time, I think there's gonna be pushback. There's also people who make their money, um, by pushing forward this sort of rhetoric. And I think it can be challenging to go up against and be like, Ugh.

Maybe this isn't working, but that's the, the thing that I always come back to is that we have [00:19:00] been trying this for such a long time and mental health outcomes are continuing to get worse and worse, so we need to try something new.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, it's such a good point. It's such a good point. And you know, the other thing it makes me think of is you can see why the, the pushback may come from these sort of larger systemic or organizational kinds of places. Because like you said, there's money to be made. And you talk about this in the book too, is like at the individual level, people wanna have certainty.

They wanna have control. And they think like, if I can. Shift my mindset here, then I can, you know, like, like I'll be able to, um, pursue this happiness, right? That like, and they think that the pursuit of happiness is gonna give them certainty and control. Um, but it, but it. Like you said, we've been trying this forever and it really just doesn't work, but it's, it's hard to get people to give up that idea and you tell a story in your book about one of your clients [00:20:00] and I was sitting there going, Yep, me too.

I had a client just like this. It was like no matter what we did, I really struggled to get her to give up the idea. And not based on what I was telling her, but based on her experience is this rule you have that I must be positive all the time. Like, how is that working for you? Where is it not? What is the cost?

How is it keeping you stuck? And oof, I really struggled. I couldn't get her there.

Whitney Goodman: Yeah, it's, it's really challenging and I've seen that type of rhetoric manifest in almost like O C D type symptoms where the feeling of like, my thoughts have to all be pure and positive and good or something bad is going to happen to me, and I think that's echoed in a lot of like the positivity literature.

Think positive thoughts and good things will happen to you. And when something then bad happens in that person's life, it's like they feel like it's their fault.

Jill Stoddard: Oh gosh. Like with [00:21:00] Manifesting or The Secret or what's the other one? You talk about it in your book that's like that the manifesting the Secret, The,

Whitney Goodman: there's the power of positive thinking. Um, the

Jill Stoddard: There's another one that's basically magic, you know, magical thinking that like, if I just put it out into the world, this is what's gonna

Whitney Goodman: The law of attraction

Jill Stoddard: A lot of attraction. That's it. That's exactly it. That's exactly it. Um, and yes, and I've actually had a couple clients who struggle with ocd and those are the exact things that end up turning into, , compulsions and then it's, , like if anything's going wrong in my life, it's my fault. It's that I'm just not like thinking positively enough about it.

Yeah, yeah. Ugh, it's so sticky. And then I think the other piece too, you know, at that, that individual. And you, you alluded to this earlier, is that people sort of wrongly think that the opposite of toxic positivity is negativity. And they're like, Well, I don't wanna be a negative person. You know, and there's, it's, it's the, it's the [00:22:00] black and white thinking, right?

The lack of seeing this as a more sort of nuanced and fluid kind of concept, the both and aspects of it.

Whitney Goodman: Mm-hmm. . Absolutely. I, I think there's a really, uh, big gap between toxic positivity and being negative all the time. It's not like you have to pick one or the other.

Jill Stoddard: right. Yeah, absolutely. Um, I wanna talk a little bit about. The function of this, cuz I think this is really important. And for any of us who want to change some of our behaviors, I think it's important to recognize the role they play. Like I always say it works or we wouldn't do it right? Like procrastination works.

We can all say cognitively like, Oh, I know procrastination is bad. Well it works or you wouldn't do it right? And the moment you give yourself permission to put up a task till tomorrow, you get relief. Of course, tomorrow you have just as much to do and less time to do it. So in the long run it is not beneficial, but in the short term it works.

[00:23:00] And so I think this, this idea with toxic positivity, it has a function for those of us who do it to ourselves, and it also has a function when we do it to someone else. Right. So if you're saying to me, Gosh, I just had a really hard morning and I had this other interview and I think I blew it. And I was like, Oh, don't worry about it.

I'm sure you did fine. Right? And now not only are you already feeling anxious and worried now you feel bad about the fact that you're anxious and worried, cuz I just told you you shouldn't feel that way. Right? But what is, what is the function for me? Like, why do so many people feel compelled to go, Oh, I'm sure you did great.

Don't worry, it's all. And you know what? At least you didn't like totally make a fool of yourself on camera, you know?

Whitney Goodman: There's a couple of reasons why I think we do this. One is that it feels good to be able to solve problems, right? We wanna make things better for other people. , there's a little bit of that, like ego driven desire to have the solution. And I [00:24:00] even come up against this often. A therapist, especially early on in my career of like, gosh, if I can just buy the right thing, you know, to fix this for the other person.

We also are confronted with a lot of difficult feelings when people are going through hard things, particularly things like grief loss, where we might be confronted with our own mortality or the fact that our parents are going to die, and so in order to avoid. Those hard feelings, we just want to shut it down and, and move away from it.

Which I think is, is the other part, is that sometimes people are just trained to say these things because it's all they heard and they don't really have other words. I don't think it's always like ill intentioned or, or mean when people are saying these things at all.

Jill Stoddard: I think probably most of the time it's not, It's probably very well intentioned and there's just a lack of awareness that the way I'm responding to you in this [00:25:00] moment is actually less about you and more about me, that I'm having a really hard time sitting with your grief or your pain or whatever it is.

And so I'm gonna do whatever I can to try to just like create a, an easier space for us to. To existence. So, you know, we all know how important relationships are and, and research just continues to support that. Really, like the most important thing to our overall health and wellbeing is that we have quality connections with other human beings.

And so to that end, I'm sure we would, we would all like to be able to respond to other people. Pain in a way that isn't invalidating, that doesn't bring toxic positivity into the dynamic. , and you know, of course not all of us are trained therapists who maybe have been actually taught how to do that.

So do you have some like thoughts or tips that you can give our non therapist listeners? You know, when other people come to. With pain, , what do they need [00:26:00] to watch out for to make sure they're not doing that toxic, positive, toxic positivity thing, and what can they do instead?

Whitney Goodman: Yeah, so I'll speak from the perspective of someone that you're close with and you have an established relationship with. I think the first thing to do is to start seeking understanding, which is what a lot of therapists do earlier. On, right? We're asking questions. We're trying to learn more about the problem.

We wanna make sure that before we offer any type of advice, solution, opinion, that we really have a sense of what's. Going on, and I look at toxic positivity as being a really simple solution for a complicated problem. So you're trying to get to know that complicated problem. From there, I think it's really about validation and empathy and thinking about how can I show this person that I'm listening to them, that I understand what they're going through, and that it makes sense to me, you know, why they're struggling.

So saying, I hear you. , I get why you're upset. [00:27:00] Uh, this is something hard going there. And then from there, if you are trying to move into an action stage, I think this is where we can be really collaborative with people about thinking about what can I offer? What boundaries do I have? What skills do I have and what does this person need from me?

They might just want you to listen. They might not want any type of of action, but you can really discuss that with them and, and try to make it a mutual process.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, I think that's something we skip over all the time. It doesn't seem natural to say like, What do you think? How can I be, be most helpful to you right now? Like, do you feel like you just need me to listen? Do you just wanna vent or are you looking for me to try to like brainstorm some solutions with you?

And often, sometimes a person will say, I. I don't know, , but I think a lot of times they know like, I just want you to listen. Maybe later I'll ask you for solutions. And, but that we skip that step. It's not, it's not the natural next thing to say. Like, How can I, how can I be helpful? And I think that first part, you know, I [00:28:00] think that's a really easy shift that people can make.

And just to give like a simple example, if someone were to say like, um, Oh God, I'm really nervous about this job interview. You know, our instinct might be to say like, Oh, don't be nervous. You'll nail it. You always do great at these things. That's clearly well intentioned. I'm trying to make you feel better, but I feel invalidated because I'm already nervous, right?

So you telling me not to be nervous is not helpful. If instead a person said, Well, of course you're nervous. This is important to you, you wanna do.

Whitney Goodman: Yep.

Jill Stoddard: Like, Oh gosh, that makes me feel so much calmer. It's like you said, I now feel understood and

Whitney Goodman: Mm-hmm.

Jill Stoddard: and, and now we can go from there. Now if you wanna tell me, you know what, I have a feeling you're gonna do great because you have a way of being able to, you know, speak about your accomplishments.

That is really impressive. Right. And it, you're gonna be more open to be able to hear that if it's led by that initial valid.

Whitney Goodman: Absolutely. And I think, you know, [00:29:00] asking about like, Oh, do you wanna talk about what parts you're nervous about? Do you wanna talk through like, What you're worried about. And from there we can give more targeted like responses based on those things of if someone's saying, Oh, I'm worried about getting up in front of people and presenting something.

Oh, well I remember that last time you did that. You did a really great job. Like what worked before? You prepared for that and trying to have a conversation instead of just fix it.

Jill Stoddard: Yes. Yeah, totally. Yeah. Curiosity can be helpful here, right? Yeah. Yeah. So what about the flip side of this? So we are talking about how, if I'm the listener, I can respond in a way that isn't rife with toxic positivity. If I'm the receiver of someone's toxic positivity, I'm sharing with you that I'm really nervous about this job interview, and you're telling me like, Oh, don't worry about it.

You're gonna be fine. How might we respond? Like is there a way, I know there's a way you talk about it in your book, but how do we give people feedback that [00:30:00] maybe that's not what we need?

Whitney Goodman: If it's somebody that again, you're in a close relationship with, I think the place to start is to validate that they're trying to help you. So to say like, I know you're trying to be helpful. I know you wanna support me, and

that's not really what I'm looking for right now. That doesn't really help me right now.

And then if you can, Offering them a way that they can be helpful. So I would love if we could talk through why I'm nervous or can you just sit and listen while I vent and trying to give the person something tangible that they can do.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, that's great. And then it's not, you know, you don't wanna shut the other person down because you're just saying, you're doing this wrong, you know? Right. You're not giving me what I need. You know, That's not gonna make them better at being validating and supportive when I'm typically, That I'm sure is what.

People want. Right. And the service of having a solid relationship. Yeah. , I love the way that you [00:31:00] talk throughout the book about, , Um, how like often the whole toxic positivity thing, it like puts the onus or the blame on the individual, right? Like, you should just be able to be happy all the time and if you're not, you must be doing something wrong.

Which of course, like totally ignores the role of environment and culture and systemic influences context, right? , so can you talk a little bit more about that?

Whitney Goodman: Yeah, I'm a big, uh, systems thinker and so I don't think that we can really look at the individual at all without looking at that context that you mentioned. And most of the positivity literature, I think places an over emphasis on our thoughts and leaves everything else. Out of the picture. So whenever you listen to an interview of someone that was successful, right?

They really overemphasize a lot of the time like, Well, I just believed I could do it and I did it, or I manifested it, and it distills it down into this really quick, easy thing [00:32:00] and we're leaving out of the picture like, , you know, , what did you have access to? Who was supporting you? Did you have student loan debt?

Uh, where did you live? What's your health status? Like, there's all these other things. Are your parents involved in your life? That I think actually we see through research has a tremendously large impact, even more than our thoughts, , on people and their level of.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. Right. And so then like what do we do with that?

Whitney Goodman: I think it's something we can get curious about, right? Like we can try to integrate that into our understanding of how our life is being shaped, how other people's lives are being shaped, and try to remember that we cannot give these. Simple little platitudes as a way to fix people's lives or to understand them.

Like there's just way more nuance to that. And I think as consumers, we have to remember that [00:33:00] when taking in any type of self-help or psychological information of like, this is just a snippet and I need to apply this to the greater context of my.

Jill Stoddard: right? It's so much more complex. There's all these other layers, and you know, if you're not thinking positively, you're not, you know, if, if thinking positively isn't working, you're not doing it wrong. There's a heck of a lot more to it than, than just that. . Yeah. So kind of along those same lines, , , it seems like another buzzword we hear a lot these days is burnout and for good reason, right?

Like, it really seems like burnout is just at an all time high. , and , we see workplaces trying to fix it by offering yoga or mindfulness. , but the expectation is that then employees will like just keep smiling and stop complaining. And so I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about toxic positivity in the workplace specifically, and then what can, , the, the individual or the employee do, [00:34:00] and what can those of us who are leaders do to not fall into this kind of trap?

Whitney Goodman: Toxic positivity is rampant in the workplace and, and for a good reason, because I think. For leaders, it's, it's much easier to work with very positive, agreeable people, right? But we know that that's not helpful or effective, especially in certain industries. So I think for employees it's important to develop a language and assertiveness and boundaries that you can implement in the workplace.

Um, finding allies that you can speak to about what's going wrong and, and finding a way to mix. Professionalism with also sharing when things have been upsetting, unfair, or discriminatory, even in certain situations. For leaders, I definitely recommend like having a set aside space where people can echo [00:35:00] complaints, where they can share things that have been going wrong for them.

I think the reason people get dismissed so much or are told to stop complaining in the workplace is. There's no place for that stuff. And so maybe it's being

brought up at moments where it doesn't fit and that person is seen as taking away from the agenda or pulling the focus onto them. And really it's because they're just trying to be heard.

And I think if they felt validated, understood, and heard, we would see a lot. Of that. And then of course the last piece is like actually making structural real changes in the workplace that support workers that are legitimate, such as like paid time off and making sure that there's fair practices happening within the workplace.

Healthcare, things like that are so much more effective than a mandatory webinar about mental health. You know, like when people are already working 12 hour days and they're exhausted, like that's not gonna.

Jill Stoddard: Well, and in [00:36:00] a way, like some of those webinars, and I've led many of

Whitney Goodman: Yeah,

Jill Stoddard: you know, in a way they, they even lend more to this toxic positivity thing because it's like, let me teach you skills for how you as an individual can be less stressed, which actually means more happy because, you know, as a.

Like as a supervisor, I just want everybody to smile and not complain because that makes my work life easier. Right. So it's like continuing to put the onus on the individual to, And not that there's anything wrong with self-improvement, right? It's not this black or white thing as we've been saying, but to strictly put the onus on individuals that like, Listen, if you're not happy, it's because you are doing something wrong.

So let me do this webinar to teach or yoga or microphones, you know, to teach you these skills so that you can just like, Calm down and get happier and smile, and then we'll all just be much better off at work. Right. I mean, it's really problematic.

Whitney Goodman: No, they're, they're certainly ticking off a box, right, of like, we acknowledged mental health. I actually had a [00:37:00] situation where I was supposed to speak at a law firm and I told them like, I will speak about the workplace's responsibilities as well. And then they were no longer interested in having the talk.

So I think there's definitely a pressure, , to just talk about the individual and what they can do, you know, to manage their time and get better.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. Wow, that's fascinating. I mean, that, that's not proof in the pudding right

Whitney Goodman: Right.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. Wow. , right. And I think the other uphill battle here is we are so re. Forced for positivity, especially at work, Right? When you're, And I've told this story I think on the podcast before, maybe I wrote it in my book, I don't remember.

But, um, when I was in my graduate school program, I was, you know, in a back office at the clinic, not in a place where any of the clients could hear or see me or anything. And, and I was laughing. And the person who was kind of in charge of the clinic came and like got after me, like sort of yelled at me because I was laughing too loud.

I'm like, Uh oh, okay. I guess that's not professional. [00:38:00] And then fast forward a handful of days, maybe a week later, and the same person gave me feedback that I wasn't smiling enough that my face was, you know, like too serious. Right. , and I like, it was, you know, aside from the problem of this like inconsistency of like, Oh my God, I don't know what to do with my face and my voice because everything I do I do is wrong.

, but I do, I mean, maybe that's not a great example because I was getting yelled at for laughing. But I do think in general we get really reinforced for smiling and being positive and not complaining, and it feels good to be. Liked or rewarded or, you know, it's like there's, there's just a lot of heavy reinforcement for doing that and often punishment when, especially for women, I mean, how many of us been told we need to smile, sweetheart?

You know, you look a lot cuter when you smile and when we play nice and we're agreeable and, you know, nobody likes a complainer, which I also wanna ask you about. , so it, it, it can be [00:39:00] an uphill battle for sure. so let's talk about a couple specific. Tips and then I do wanna come back around to complaining.

So if we're letting go of toxic positivity, right? This means we have to like accept that to be human is to experience painful emotions. So like we're not gonna beat ourselves up if we're feeling grief or anxiety or sadness. And we

have to allow ourselves to process the emotion. That arise. And so I think a lot of people genuinely get that in theory.

And you know, in addition to all the toxic positivity we see in social media, I think there is a decent. Maybe not balance, but also a smattering. Though the information is out there that it's important for us to feel our feelings. Like, what's that phrase? The only way out is through, you know, there's some of that there too.

So. So even if there is buy-in, okay, I get it. I'm not supposed to stuff my emotions down. I need to let myself process it. I think where a lot of people get stuck, [00:40:00] Okay, but how, Right, Like when am I supposed to have time to do that if I'm working and then taking care of my kids and like, how do I even process my emotions?

And you give a number of really good tips in the book about exactly how to do that. , so can you give us like one or two of your favorites or that you think are the most powerful ways that, that they can engage with and process difficult emotion.

Whitney Goodman: The first place I like people to start is really just getting in touch with what feelings feel like in their body. I think most people that come to see me feelings for them are thoughts. They're like disconnected with how they're manifesting fi. And when you can start to get in touch with that, I think you have a little bit of a leg up on getting ahead of the feeling.

So what does anxiety feel like for me? What does sadness feel like? , and how can I be aware of that manifestation? , the other thing that I think is really helpful for people to do is to learn how to [00:41:00] label their feelings and to develop a wider vocabulary for those emotions. So you've probably seen a lot of those like feelings, wheels online. I know for a lot of my clients, they might be able to identify like, Happy, angry, sad, and it doesn't feel great when we don't have a lot of other language for our feelings.

So just trying to get a little bit more granular can be very helpful.

Jill Stoddard: Okay, so getting in touch with the feeling. So really like in a way, being kind of mindful, like getting present and even recognizing where I feel this in my body, what anxiety feels like for me physically.

And then labeling that feeling, this is fear, this is despair, this is anxiety. And then is there anything else like other than just like, do we just sit with it? Is there

anything. , , that people can do to, or, or even to realize, uh, like if, if our sort of default is to stuff, is there a way to know that, that we're doing that or kind of like to do the opposite?

Whitney Goodman: [00:42:00] Yes. So when you're somebody that's prone to pushing things down, I think you have to find ways to allow yourself to move through the feeling and like discharge some of that in some way. So some ways that you can do that are definitely talking about it, like in the context of therapy or with a friend writing about it can be a great expressive strategy or any type of.

Art, creative pursuits, and then thinking about like, how can I move my body while I'm working through this emotion can be helpful. So sometimes I tell people, You're gonna pair the uh, feeling with an action, right? So I'm gonna be anxious and I'm gonna go on a walk. I'm gonna be anxious and I'm gonna go to this yoga class.

And so we're not denying the feeling or trying to get rid of it through that thing. It's more just like, how can we use this activity to help? Walk through that feeling and a lot of the time we experience a decrease by doing that.

Jill Stoddard: right. Where the decrease isn't the goal, but it is [00:43:00] often the outcome and, and sometimes, you know that phrase, the more we resist or. What we resist persists. Right. So it feels like the feeling is the problem, but often it's the, it is the suppression of the feeling that actually makes it greater in, , frequency or intensity.

Or duration. Yeah. I like to use a, , kind of like using the breath as a vehicle. To allow emotion. So I think a lot of people are taught to use the breath to force relaxation, right? Like, okay, do your deep breath to get rid of this anxiety. , and what I, this is, this is actually from acceptance commitment there, but, but you know, where you inhale, you physically make space, right?

Your lungs expand, your body expands. So to use the breath as a way to expand, to like make space for whatever you're feeling. And when you exhale to let go of the resistance. So not to let go of the feeling, not don't exhale and try to make the feeling go away. I mean, try it. It's not gonna work. [00:44:00] It'll come right back.

But sort of letting go of that unwillingness to have it so inhaling to make space, Oh here you are, there's nothing I need to do here. And exhaling to let go of the resistance. And that, that seems to just give a little bit more like wiggle.

Whitney Goodman: Mm-hmm.

Jill Stoddard: and that, that one, I think I, I like to lead clients in that as a closed eye exercise, but I do it myself all the time.

And with practice it's now something that, you know, even if I'm driving with my eyes open, I can take one breath and I'm sort of there, you know, it like sort of cues it because it's something that I've practiced enough times and it's a. Difference, but it's different to breathe as a way to process emotion versus to breathe as a way to try to make the emotion go.

Whitney Goodman: Yes. I love that approach.

Jill Stoddard: , I love that you devote an entire chapter to complaining. , obviously, you know, I love it because humans complain, right? We all [00:45:00] complain here and there and I'm sure we all probably know someone who complains a lot and might not like to listen to that all the time. So I thought we could talk a little bit about.

What are the benefits and drawbacks of complaining? Because there are some benefits to complaining and like we were saying before, everything has a function. It works or you wouldn't do it, but there also can be drawbacks. So let's talk about benefits and drawbacks and then maybe like how we can complain more effectively.

Whitney Goodman: Yes, complaining is definitely a way that we build connection. I'm sure anyone listening can think about a time when they've been sharing, complaining about parenthood or whatever it is, the traffic that day, and it makes you feel. Closer to people. It's also a way that we can get our needs met or create change.

We talked about creativity before, and I think complaining can work in a lot of similar ways of like, I have to identify what's wrong if I'm going to change it. Now, the dark side, of course, is that if we complain too much or complaining isn't [00:46:00] effective, we're not getting our needs met, it can often become very circular.

And we get stuck in that complaint loop. And then it causes disruption, you know, for us and for our relationships because it can be difficult to tolerate for extended periods of time.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah, especially you talk about the help rejecting complainer, you know, we probably all know someone like that. So that's the person who complains to you frequently and when you offer suggestions to help them. Solve whatever it is that they're struggling with. Yeah. But, yeah. But yeah, but you know, it's the, I want to just keep complaining and complaining and never actually do anything to change my situation.

And I think that specific brand of complainer can really take a toll on a relationship. And similar to what you were saying before, like, we like to be able to solve problems, we like to be able to feel like we're helping. Right. And that it, it's, you know, it can feel. exhausting and like maybe being on a treadmill, but not getting anywhere if you're [00:47:00] constantly talking to the friend who's complaining about the same things over and over, and rejecting any of the the helpful suggestions that you make.

Whitney Goodman: and, and that's also a piece about like, I find that people who complain like that a lot often just feel unheard and maybe like they don't want a solution. . I think when someone is in that help rejecting complaint cycle, that that's also a, a cue for us to maybe step back and be like, Maybe I should just listen, or maybe I need to set a boundary with this person if I feel like I cannot listen to them or help them.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. Yeah. I love that. , okay, the other thing I wanna ask you about is you, you have established this gigantic social media following, and I'm curious, like what, Actually, let me ask you this. Was, I, did I read it correctly in the book that like, are you credited with coming up with this term toxic positivity?

Whitney Goodman: So I'm [00:48:00] not sure if I did or not, but I did create the first like, social media post about toxic positivity that went viral in 2018. And that's really what led to this book, , was just creating that chart that I like made on my office floor on a

Jill Stoddard: Okay. Right. And so then was, did you have a large social media following before that or is this really what kind of triggered. Your like big Instagram

Whitney Goodman: Yeah, I did not, I had just recently started my, , private practice and I was like, Oh, Instagram's free. I'll start writing some stuff on there. I think I had, I don't know, maybe a thousand followers at the time when I put this up and it got picked up by a lot of like news outlets and so then things started to grow from there, but I never.

Intended for Instagram to get to the level that it is. It just has spiraled into being such a big part of my career.

Jill Stoddard: [00:49:00] I mean, it's so interesting cuz that really goes to show how much this concept of toxic positivity really resonates with people. You know, that maybe people are sick of all these social media accounts that are telling me to, Don't worry, be happy. It's all good. Keep calm and carry on, or whatever other other crap is out there.

And I, I love that you've, you know, you've put content out that's helpful for people and that you, were you approached to write the book or was it something that you decided to do and then send a proposal in?

Whitney Goodman: I was approached to write a book, , and at the time I was still pretty young. I was like, Gosh, I can't write a book like before I'm 30, I need some more time . , so I just kind of pushed it off and then, , like two years later I was like, Wow, this toxic positivity thing has continued to grow. So I decided to put a, a proposal together and I went back to the publisher that originally had contacted.

Jill Stoddard: Got it. Well, I'm so glad you did. It's a great book. , it is chock full of [00:50:00] value while also being really accessible. You know, I love that. It's, at least for me, I think all of us have diminishing attention spans. And so, you know, to have a book that has a number of bullet points in it and subtitled, like, it's just, it's easy to read both physically and to absorb intellectually

, so I highly recommend it to people. Um, I know people can find you on Instagram at Sit with wit if they wanna learn more about you or find the book. Where else can people find.

Whitney Goodman: Yes, you can find me on my website, sit with wit.com. Um, my book is sold anywhere books are sold. You can also find links to it through social media on my website.

Jill Stoddard: And of course we will link to all of this in the show notes. So Whitney, thank you so much for being here. It was so great to talk to you.

Whitney Goodman: Thank you for having me.

Yael Schonbrun: hey psychologist off the clock listeners. I'm going to guess that if you are listening to this episode, that [00:51:00] you love to geek out about books in psychology.

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