

Research Paper

Silenced by Shame: How Youth Suppress Emotional Needs Due to Toxic Positivity Culture

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ABSTRACT

Toxic positivity means forcing positive thinking which leads to hiding or suppressing negative emotions. Although positivity can help people cope with stress, when it is pushed too much, it can affect mental health. This review paper explores how toxic positivity affects the emotional well-being of young people. In this study we examine the impact of toxic positivity on suppression, feeling of shame & guilt, and how it leads to problems such as stress, anxiety and poor emotional validation as a result of toxic positivity. Previous Research shows that due to pressure of toxic positivity many youths feel pressure to always stay happy and positive, even when they are struggling. This pressure creates place for suppressing their emotions which affects their emotional wellbeing by reduces their chances to build resilience, stops open and honest communication, and often leaves them feeling lonely. Social media also makes the problem worse by promoting the idea that people should always look cheerful and successful. This review suggests that positivity doesn't mean hiding or ignoring real feelings instead, it means addressing our emotions and validating them. Addressing toxic positivity is important for helping young people cope in healthy ways, staying emotionally authentic, and form supportive relationships. Families, teachers, and mental health professionals can create awareness by encouraging open conversations and balancing positivity with acceptance of struggles.

Keywords: *Toxic positivity, Shame and Guilt, Emotional Suppression, Coping Strategies, Youth mental health*

Many young people today face a social environment that constantly stresses the need to “stay positive,” instead of accepting and validating them they are often triggered to suppress their emotions. When people face any difficulties and they try for getting emotional validation, they are often met with responses such as “don’t think negatively” or “positivity is everything” (Sonia, 2025; Putra et al., 2023). Instead of receiving validation for their emotions, these responses make them overlook their genuine emotions, leaving them feeling as their emotions are negative and unacceptable (Mui & Saili, 2024). Over time, this repeated exposure to toxic positivity people tend to believe that their genuine emotions as negative emotions are those as their weakness, which increases the feelings of shame and guilt (Cunha et al., 2012; Muris et al., 2015). As a result, youth start

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doubting their own emotions and feel forced to keep up an appearance of constant positivity (Dejonckheere et al., 2022).

This pressure to appear positive pushes many young people toward emotional suppression. In order to align with the societal expectation of positivity, they often wear a mask of positivity to hide their sadness, frustration, or fear, often they hide these feelings from others because fear of being judged as negativity or not being positive; this makes them force towards suppressing their emotions (Putra et al., 2023; Kaplow et al., 2014). When people suppress their emotion, it may make them look like they are positive outside but the suppressed emotions come back in ways that affect mental health, contributing to stress, anxiety, and guilt within themselves which affects them psychologically (Patel & Patel, 2019; Mamat & Anderson, 2023). These suppressed emotions disturb meaningful relationships, because their authentic communication becomes limited and individuals struggle to share their true emotions (An et al., 2022). For adolescents and young adults, this is the stage for emotional development and identity formation; it heavily depends upon acceptance and validation from society, if their emotions are not being validated and accepted in this stage it affects their mental health by suppressing their emotions which is harmful (Nguyen et al., 2025; Gilbert & Irons, 2008). As a result of trying to fit into societal norms, resilience can gradually weaken and long-term difficulties can arise in dealing with life's challenges (Michailidou, 2023).

Understanding toxic positivity is important to identify the hidden costs of toxic positivity on youth well-being. While existing papers have explored this topic in general contexts, there is very less focus on how it specifically affects young people. Various themes are discussed in this paper, such as the pressure to always appear positive, feelings of shame and guilt, the silence of emotions, and the psychological effects of toxic positivity. At the same time, it also includes related healthier coping strategies that validate emotions rather than suppressing them, ultimately supporting the mental health and authentic growth of young individuals (Sonia, 2025; Putra et al., 2023; Mui & Saili, 2024).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Toxic Positivity: The Pressure to Always be Positive

Toxic positivity makes young people feel like they have to always be happy, even when they are having a hard time. Because of this, a lot of young people hide how they really feel and may even feel bad or ashamed when they can't stay positive (Sonia, 2025; Putra et al., 2023). This habit of hiding feelings doesn't help them; it actually makes them feel more anxious, depressed, and stressed, and it also makes their emotional expressions less real (Mui & Saili, 2024). Toxic positivity, therefore, acts as a hindrance that prevents youth from seeking genuine assistance or acquiring healthy coping mechanisms (Michailidou, 2023; Sonia, 2025). To help young people think more positively, we can replace toxic positivity with validation, emotional honesty, and acceptance of all kinds of feelings. This will help them be honest about how they feel and meet their emotional needs in a real way.

Shame and Guilt: The Emotional Cost of Being Negative

In addition to this, it's important to remember that negative feelings aren't bad, they're just a normal part of being human (Muris et al., 2015). In today's culture, though, young people often feel like they have to stay positive all the time, which makes them ignore or dismiss their natural negative feelings. For example, when we see about positive parenting, when their kids say they are in pain or are not feeling well, parents sometimes tell them to "be positive." This response may induce feelings of guilt or shame in children for expressing

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their genuine emotions (Cunha et al., 2012; Shahnawaz & Malik, 2016). Over time, holding back these feelings can be bad which affects their wellbeing (Tangney et al., 1996). Consequently, stress, anxiety, and depression develop, while genuine emotional expression and positive help-seeking behaviours shrink. Toxic positivity conceal the genuine emotional requirements of youth, increasing their capacity to adopt ineffective coping mechanisms or shift into harmful behaviours. To prevent this, it's important to work on emotional validation and encourage honesty in how you express your feelings, through these steps we can move toward better mental health and stronger relationships.

Silenced Emotions: How Youth Hide Feelings

Toxic positivity also makes teens feel like they have to be happy all the time, which makes it hard for them to show their true feelings and problems (Muris et al., 2015; Gilbert & Irons, 2008). This toxic positivity is also perpetuated in society and thus the young people are made to feel guilty or ashamed when they encounter normal problems in life and therefore suppress their emotions. Research has shown that teenagers tend to remain silent about their feelings around others, especially their fellow peers, more than their parents because they fear reapproach. Boys are even more repressed due to societal expectations which state that boys are supposed to be tougher regardless of the challenges that he/she is going through (Tangney et al, 1996; Gilbert and Irons, 2008). Healthy response to emotions is reassessment and self-compassion, whereas toxic positivity is the opposite, thus, causing individuals to feel ashamed and lonely, thus, deteriorating their mental health. It indirectly compels youth to close their actual emotional need and thus aggravates their problems and unmet needs by not facing their feelings but rather by holding them in.

Mental Health Impact: The Cost of Emotional Suppression

The studies imply that emotional suppression implies that stressful life events have a strong relationship with self-harm ideation among adolescents (Kaplow et al., 2014; Muris et al,2015). In case of trauma or stress that is superimposed on this suppression, the risk of mental illness and suicide is even greater (Kaplow et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2012). Also, the fact that people conceal their feelings makes them more ashamed and guilty. This is due to the fact that most of the youth are instructed to be positive or strong when being in the presence of people rather than expressing themselves. Mental health of young adults is very important and they should not be allowed to develop self-harm thoughts, motives and even attempt it (Kaplow et al, 2014; Shahnawaz and Malik, 2016). Providing young people with an opportunity to discuss their emotions without being afraid of being judged and not allowed to do so can help them to feel better. Such a helpful environment makes young adults discover the actual means of coping with issues and prevents the negative effects of toxic positivity. It is also conducive to the development of the mental health of young adults due to validation and psychological support.

Supporting Youth: Strategies To Promote Healthy Emotional Expression

Adolescents who do not express their emotions are more prone to self-harm and are not very healthy overall (Nguyen et al., 2025; Patel & Patel, 2019). Research that has been completed shows that self-compassion is a protective feature against damage, but emotional constraint exacerbates stress, sadness, anxiety, and may result in physical disease (Nguyen et al,2025; An et al., 2022). Toxic positivity results in shame and silence when it endorses the long-term avoidance of emotions. Conversely, there exist psychological methods that are directly focused on suppressed thoughts and can be effective in reducing suffering (Mamat & Anderson, 2023). Adolescents need a safe space that could recognize and legitimize their emotions and allow them to discuss their feelings (Nguyen et al., 2025; Patel and Patel,

2019). These emotional needs can be addressed with the assistance of such values as honesty, kindness, and self-control (Nguyen et al., 2025; An et al., 2022). Young people will be able to prevent the damage in their lives caused by toxic positivity by promoting these methods of coping with issues (Mamat and Anderson, 2023; Patel and Patel, 2019). Motivating teens to treat themselves kindly and to share their emotions will give them the power to handle the issues in their lives without necessarily having to pose as fine.

CONCLUSION

Toxic positivity can also impose pressure on society and young people can find it hard to talk about the way they truly feel. Youths have been made to act positively and this has helped such individuals suppress negative feelings such as sadness, fear, and frustration. Their emotions are not seen and that leads to the feelings of shame and guilt. One should understand that it is normal to be emotionally depressed or to be able to share their pain and it is not right or wrong to show their feelings instead of hiding them. The ability to acknowledge and express one's true feelings can enhance emotional resilience in young people, as well as strengthen authentic connections between them. When people are allowed to express their genuine emotions, we create an environment of acceptance and understanding. Positivity doesn't mean suppressing or hiding our emotions say showing us as a positive person, positivity means accepting and validating our emotions and bouncing back stronger.

Future research can focus on reducing the effects of toxic positivity by testing coping methods such as self-compassion, therapy, and emotional validation. Comparing their effectiveness across age groups and genders may help identify those most at risk. Longitudinal studies on adolescents and young adults would also clarify the long-term impact of emotional suppression. These findings could guide families, educators, and mental health professionals in creating supportive spaces where youth feel free to express emotions and build resilience through authenticity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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