Episode 1 — What even *is* toxic positivity?

Overview: Work relationships can often be complex and can feature blurred lines between the personal and professional. For some, this can result in unnecessary pressure, gaslighting, and toxic positivity, the idea that the best way to cope with a challenging situation is to put a positive spin on it. This episode looks at the psychology behind human emotions, how we regulate them and suppress them during challenging times, and how all of this can relate to toxic positivity.

Featured Guests
Dr. Norman Farb, *University of Toronto Mississauga*

Transcript

Simone Lima: "No, no, this is just a rough phase, everyone, and it will pass! All we can do right now is really just stay positive! " "So, we can't afford to hire right now, but we need everyone's hard work to close this one deal. If we land this big account and achieve our OKRs, the whole company goes to Disney World by the end of the year! How cool is that?" "Thank you for all the extra hours you put in. The new feature is a success! There is pizza and beer waiting for you in the kitchen to celebrate this great achievement for our company!"

Hi, my name is Simone, my pronouns are she/her, and this intro is loosely based on real events. Yeah, for real, I've been through some version of all of those things in workplaces! I enjoyed my work in early-stage startups. I had fun; I was creating a career that felt meaningful in tech ventures that seemed socially engaged; I was making money; I was making friends! I really was the young adult I dreamed of being… despite that unspoken pressure of maybe picking up client calls at 11 pm. Or the constant worrying about work even during my time off. Or not even really having much time off because goals were simply not attainable, and the teams were recurrently understaffed.

I now understand how my previous workplaces' cultures cultivated, intentionally or not, a very complex work relationship that blurred the lines between my personal and professional lives and put me in a place that was full of unnecessary pressure, gaslighting and toxic positivity, the idea that the best way to cope with a challenging situation is to put a positive spin on it and not dwell on its negative aspects. I experienced that being done to the point where leaders would avoid discussions on impactful problems, and employees were left feeling guilty and overwhelmed. Now I'm here to investigate how toxic positivity can be found in workplaces, its consequences and whether it impacts female-identifying employees disproportionately. This is Positively exhausted - Stories of toxic positivity in the workplace, a limited podcast series from GATE audio productions.

In this series of three episodes, I will talk to psychology researchers, business scholars and people in the workforce to understand why toxic positivity has entered our work lives, its impacts and how to identify it. I will also try to answer a few questions about my personal journey along the way.

Before we start the episode, here are some important disclaimers. First: This series contains examples of work relationships that may trigger some listeners, so listen responsibly. Second: Even though some of the discussion you will hear mentions "female" and "male" individuals, I recognize the existence of other gender identities and that toxic positivity might affect these individuals differently. Since research on this topic is still very nascent, I made the decision to not discuss other genders and I hope this podcast is a starting point for further work on toxic positivity and its impacts on individuals of different gender identities. Now, on to the show.

For some time, I felt like working in an environment with flexible work hours and free energy drinks in the kitchen was all I could really want. I belonged to the community I had longed for. My company was trying to build a family atmosphere, and it seemed like they cared for our general well-being and mental health, especially when we *had* to work those many hours. I felt like this was the way of working of my generation, and I was proud there was a clear divide between what I was doing and what I had seen my parents do in what now seemed like just dull, fun-less offices.So, fast forward a few months later. I was already living in Toronto and starting to write the scripts for these episodes when I found myself procrastinating, avoiding even looking at my computer, because I didn't want to discuss my previous workplaces. I decided to write down the physical reactions I was getting from just thinking about the job I had just left. This is what I got: "my heart is racing and my chest area seems cold. I don't feel cold, but I feel pressure on my chest. I feel dizzy, or like I'm gonna just float away."So, how could it be that the same events were causing me such conflicting emotions?To try to answer that question, I had a chat with Dr. Norman Farb.

Norman Farb*:* Hi, my name is Norman Farb, I'm an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto Mississauga.

Simone Lima: What Norman studies is the neuroscience of human identity and emotion.

Norman Farb: And I try to figure out how mental habits that we form about how we think about ourselves and the world shape a context that leads us into flourishing, or down into the pits of despair, and what we can do to push those habits around. So, to make people a little happier and healthier, if possible, is the dream.

Simone Lima:To try to understand why I was having such conflicting emotions, we started from the very beginning. Can you tell us a little bit about what are human emotions? Why are they important? Why do we have them?

Norman Farb: There are lots of different theories of human emotion. And there's actually quite a bit of variety of opinion about how hardwired our emotions are, versus how much we've learned to even have certain emotions based on what we've learned from socially growing up. But I'm a bit more on the "at least some things are hardwired" side. And so from that perspective, emotions are ways of rapidly bringing in a lot of information to bias us towards a certain type of behavior that's supposed to be good for our survival, right. And if you're subscribed to evolutionary theories, in Psychology, those things that are hardwired would have at some point, at least in our in our history, helped us survive.

Simone Lima: Norman then explained how emotions trigger actions, but not all of these actions are as useful as they once were. Opening our eyes and mouth when we are scared, for example, might have helped us dodge a predator in the past, but can't really help us face a nerve-wracking performance evaluation at work, because fleeing from meeting at work is not generally considered socially acceptable behavior in the north american society in the 2020s.

Simone Lima*:* How would you say we learn healthy norms around expressing emotions when we are in a social context?

Norman Farb*:* Yeah, I think, you know, a great question really relevant to our conversation today. I wouldn't wanna say that the ideal it to just always do whatever you want, you can see with little kids that that gets you into trouble and you can see with poorly regulated adults that that gets you into trouble. We ought not to always say the first thing that comes to our minds, especially if it's going to possibly harm another person or disrupt our ability to work together. So it's quite normal and probably sensible that there are certain customs and etiquette around being in groups. It just helps us all get

along, right? It’s very hard to think creatively if you’re worried that someone is about to hurt you in a group.

Simone Lima : Basically, regulating how we express our emotions is a big part of what has allowed us to function as a society.

Norman Farb: So we want to be able to feel, like, safe and hopefully supported and that it’s ok for us to express ideas and, even more important sometimes, negotiate conflict without it actually becoming threatening. Because we don’t always have to agree with ideas, but sometimes we have to come up with one thing that we’re gonna do in groups.

Simone Lima: So, as we grow, most human beings learn how to comprehend their emotions and shape their reactions in a way that improves our chances of achieving the goals of the group we are in. And bringing this idea into the business realm, this is the main goal of corporate cultures, guaranteeing that individuals employees are working together to achieve the company's common goals. I asked Norman how individuals can go from having an emotion, to learning how to not instinctively react to it.

Norman Farb: There are lots of theories around emotion regulation. Probably the dominant model in Western research is the process model, it theorizes that there [are] four different phases where we regulate our emotions. One is just situation selection. So by the time you're in that meeting, you already selected into that situation, so when we did not get an argument is don't go to the meeting. So let's say you have to go to the meeting, right, now you're there. So then you have three phases left, one is still something you can do ahead of time, which is choosing what you pay attention to. So it's called attention selection. So you could distract yourself from someone you know, is annoying, or decide, like, I'm just not gonna feed the fire. If this is someone who antagonizes me, I can just think about something else.

Simone Lima: The next two phases of emotional regulation are in what Norman calls "the consequence side", so after something or someone displayed a behavior that set off an emotional reaction.

Norman Farb: Once someone says something that can set you off, now you’re in the consequence side of emotional regulation, so the behavior has already happened. You can try to change the meaning of the behavior by doing what's called reappraising it, right. So looking at it from a different perspective, you know, this person was like, “nice shirt”, and like rolled their eyes, but maybe they're a bad person. Or maybe someone just yelled at them, or they had a really rough morning. And it's actually not about me, and they just don't know what to do with their own upset, right. So there's different ways I can try to think of the situation. And if I can come up with an explanation that I sincerely believe in, it can really change the emotional tone and situation. So if I find out that like, someone just discovered their partner was cheating on them before they said something mean about me about my shirt, and they just found out like, an hour before the meeting, I'm probably going to cut them a lot more slack and be like, “I'm not gonna take anything this person says too seriously right now, because like they're dealing with something major, right?”

Simone Lima: So reappraising can be a healthy, honest way to deal with negative emotions and change the automatic reaction they may trigger. But in fast-paced environments employees often cannot find the time or the tools to go through a reappraisal process.

Norman Farb: If you can't reappraise and change the meaning of an emotional Distressor or stressor to make it less pointy, less upsetting, then the final phase is now just controlling what you express. So

you're not gonna change the meaning of the situation, you're just gonna change your expression. And so this is most commonly talked about is just like suppressing or inhibiting the thing you want to do, because you realize it's not socially appropriate.

Simone Lima: This brings us to toxic positivity in the workplace. Toxic positive work cultures are more focused on controlling how employees perceive and express what they are feeling, and less on changing the causes of the stressful situations that contribute to the unpleasant emotions they might be experiencing in the first place. The more stressful and upsetting a situation is, the harder it is to deal with it on the meaning level, especially if, as a leader or an employee, you don't have the time or the tools to reappraise or help your team reappraise. So, in order to keep a productive environment, focused on company goals, companies can choose less complex alternatives, like distracting employees from painful exhaustion experiences with happy hours or the promise of a Disney trip. The constant suppression of emotions can have both short and long-term consequences for individuals.

Norman Farb: And really, the worst thing you can do is not try to change anything about your internal experience, or the information you're taking in and just block the expression of emotion. So suppression, that final thing you can do after you're already triggered, is not really good for teamwork, it's not good for you in the long term. Over the long term, what that ends up doing is it constricts our blood vessels, while our physiology is actually really elevated. So your heartbeat trying to pump all this blood through your system, you're gonna really stress hormones that are making you, like, try to act like fine and pull all of the blood vessels away from the surface of the body. And then that's, that's literally like a physical definition of stress.

Simone Lima: So my body was operating in high-stress conditions daily, but the culture I encountered in those environments convinced me the best employees were the positive ones, who would not allow the pressure to show, and I learned how to physically limit those reactions.

Norman Farb: In the long term, that's gonna lead to like heart disease, right and hardening of arteries. And the stress hormones will eat away at your organs, including your brain. So it's really not taking care of yourself at all just to get through the situation.

Simone Lima: Something that came up a lot in my personal experience were deadlines that were defined from the top, having large customers in mind. Because I was part of delivery teams, I knew those targets could not be met without sacrificing the quality of work, but after protesting a few times, I realized the power dynamic I was in was unlikely to change. So, working on these kinds of projects always felt like a losing game from the start. For some time, I thought that I was just unfit for big challenging responsibilities, but it turns out that when you believe a challenge is achievable, the physiological response to a difficult task can be quite different.

Norman Farb: Right, and this ties into a really large literature on what is stress, and the nature of stress and the idea that any time there is a challenge for us, it can be interpreted as stress, but if we feel like we can meet that challenge, actually it plays out differently in our bodies. Even though we elevate out heart rate and breathing rate, we don’t necessarily have that defensive constriction of the blood vessels, your attention doesn’t really narrow the same way and you can get through stressors.

Simone Lima: Apart from deflecting attention from stressors and keeping employees in a state that can harm their physical health in the long-run, this type of work environment can also create a mismatch between what individuals are feeling and what they think they are supposed to feel at their jobs. These corporate cultures can also reinforce the idea that employees can change their emotional states if they just think hard enough, which, as we have seen, is not the best way to approach undesired emotions.

In a Washington Post article on toxic positivity in the workplace, Brett Ford, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, mentions that over-analyzing one's feelings to try to feel something else can leave individuals with what she calls a "meta-emotion". When it comes to toxic positivity, this emotion is usually disappointment, because you're not as happy as you thought you could be. In my case, I also felt very frustrated because I thought I could be doing even more to feel positive about my company, my team and my work. No matter how hard I thought about the issues I had at hand, I just could not feel authentically optimistic about those challenges.

Norman Farb: There's some pretty good evidence to suggest that if you can really put a positive spin on things or have an inaccurate but skewed towards the positive bias around things, that's actually what most of us are doing, right? So we have a lot of protective biases. If we ask a hundred people "Who thinks they're better than average?", more than 50% of the people will say yes, for any kind of question, right? Sometimes, we will have life experiences that clearly tell you you are not better on a category, on something than others, but across a bunch of different ranges there is this kind of halo effect, where people try to look good and try not to look bad. And as far as we can tell, that's actually good for you. To a degree, putting a positive gloss on things is helpful. And I think a non-jaded way to think about that is that there is a lot of ambiguity in the world, and if you have some choice over how you're gonna interpret things, you might as well interpret things in an empowered and hopeful way. You might wanna lean over that way because that's gonna make you feel better, and it's gonna make you more able to function.

Simone Lima: In my experience, another aspect of toxic positive workplaces is not only that my negative emotions were not appropriate and should not be discussed at work, but also that there is this notion that I have the responsibility of solving all the problems that I'm faced with. Some companies even go to the lengths of formally making this part of their values.

Norman Farb*:* Ultimately whenever you have a cue from your body that tells you, like a feeling that something is wrong, or it's not going the way I expected even, it's not like flat out wrong or bad, you kinda have two options, right? One option is to do what most of us try to do, which is to try to get rid or fix the wrong thing, and if we can do that, then I think we should, right? So there's this idea of taking action, which is known in this theory as "Active inference", like you feel something's wrong and you decide "I'm gonna make an inference towards an action to deal with it" is how we commonly deal with our emotions, and that's one of our two options. And I think it's good to try to take action, especially when that action tries to resolve the stressor.

Simone Lima: The problem with that approach and with the idea of "thinking like an owner" is that it can be simplistic, and not account for the power dynamics and the structure in which we are immersed in our workplaces.

In an interview for El País, Dr. Carlos Jesus Fernandez, from the Sociology department at the UAM, in Madrid, shared how corporate cultures are going further and now seeking to get a different compromise from employees. According to the professor, and I quote, "before, you needed to do a job for eight hours a day. Now companies are looking for personal characteristics and competencies related to your personality." That might be why we are seeing more motivational speeches and expressions like "leadership", "entrepreneurship" or "getting out of your comfort zone" being thrown around the office. In my own experience, they made me feel like I was building something great along with the company, even if I did not have actual stakes in the venture.

In this same El País piece, Óscar Perez Zapata, from the Universidad Carlos III, also in Madrid, mentions that the goal of building such workspaces is to "create strong corporate cultures that appeal

to emotional and intimate elements, like employees' passions." In this context, when a company propels positive thinking, it is also decreasing the possibility of negative feedback from employees and it is shifting responsibility from the company's structure to the individual worker. According to Zapata, "this connects to the idea that anything can be done with self-management and that the individual employee is the only one responsible for their successes and failures [in the workplace]."

Norman Farb: The other option is known as "perceptual inference", which is the idea that "well, I didn't really expect to feel this way, but maybe I don't necessarily have to do something about this particular thing, it's actually ok that I feel this way, I can even update my expectation in that maybe I'm just gonna feel this way for a while". And if you really can authentically do that, not like say the words but not really believe it or feel it, you also resolve the stressor. So my whole day is not about how do I escape the sensation, as soon as I accept that it's ok and I can handle it, it also kinda goes away as a problem.

Simone Lima: So there you have it. Authentic optimism is good and empowering, but that's not how we will always feel, especially at work. When frustrations and negative feelings do arise, finding oneself in an environment that denies these feelings is detrimental to our mental and physical health, and to our sense of belonging to that team.

Norman Farb: And all of a sudden like "oh, we're losing customers, we're losing sales, we're not meeting deadlines, why are people quitting? Why is there so much turnover?", these are things we start seeing in organizations like that. The three things we really want in life, if you believe in social determination theory, which is theory of wellbeing, is to feel like we have agency, like what we do matters, that we have competence, in ourselves and the people around us, so that we can do the job that we want to do and the people around us can do that too. And we have relatedness, that we can connect authentically to the people around us and are held in some sort of esteem. And you can see that all three of those things are just eroded when you're not allowed to solve problems. So you crossed off the three major things that make life meaningful to people, so why would you stay in that kind of situation?

Simone Lima: Making this podcast series is a way for me to try to answer questions that consumed me in my transition from a full-time employee to a full-time MBA student. I thought a lot of what I had gone through was just my own unfortunate experience, or something that was particular to the work culture in my home country, Brazil, or even something that was related to the industry in which I had chosen to work. That is why my initial idea was to focus on discussing toxic positivity in tech startups, a segment that has, for long, hidden its struggles with mental health, propelled unorthodox productivity hacks and the idea that your success depends solely on you, a notion that I obviously strongly object. But talking to people from diverse countries and industries in the past few months just showed me that the issue is more pervasive than I had initially thought and that toxic positivity in the workplace is a phenomenon reaching far more friends than I expected. So my ultimate goal with this limited series is starting a conversation and helping listeners identify and name some of the feelings and dynamics they might be experiencing at work. I, for one, now recognize that what I felt when I started writing the scripts for these episodes was a mild panic attack. Work is part of our lives, so we might as well try to make that relationship a bit more transparent, respectful and healthy, and I hope this podcast helps in beginning that dialogue.

This was Positively Exhausted - Stories of toxic positivity in the workplace.

In the next episode, we will explore toxic positivity from the perspective of employees in different industries and investigate if there are gender differences when it comes to experiencing a toxic positive environment. In the final episode, we will explore this issue from the lens of employers.

Thank you and see you soon!