

## Episode 2 — Toxic Positivity from the lens of employees

**Overview:** What does toxic positivity look like from the lens of companies? What are the consequences for businesses when toxic positivity is present in employees' day to day? And how can employers design an organizational experience that fosters strong corporate cultures and productivity but still leaves room for an individual's authenticity and for honest problem-solving?

### Featured Guests:

Dr. Norman Farb, University of Toronto Mississauga

### Transcript

Anna: The workplace was definitely toxic. People were very, very stressed out. People were leaving, it was really hard to hold on to people. That was one of the main problems, actually, that the analysts especially would leave so quickly, it was so much work to try and train someone else and just have them leave again. But at the same time the company was like “we’re doing great, we’re doing a great job”, “good job, everyone”, like, “forge on”, like “keep doing it, this is amazing, we’re so happy!” and I’m like are we? Is anyone? This is really dystopian.

Simone Lima: Hi, my name is Simone, my pronouns are she/her, and 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. In the second episode, I am investigating toxic positivity in the workplace from the perspective of employees. How do they experience toxic positivity? How does it impact their lives? And do female-identifying workers experience it in a way that is different when compared to counterparts who identify as other genders?

Before we start, 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" identifying 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 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. And finally, you will hear interviewees' voices in this episode. All interviews were voluntary and arranged through a survey that was shared on LinkedIn. Names have been changed to protect interviewees' identities. Now on to the show.

As part of the initial research for this podcast series, I put together a quick survey that was shared on LinkedIn. Although the survey does not have statistical significance, and I recognize the incredibly biased group of individuals who responded to it (mostly white millennials working in tech and consulting, all gender-binary) it was important for me to start noticing a few patterns around toxic positivity in workplaces similar to mine.

When it came to experiencing toxic positivity, roughly half of the respondents said they had witnessed it at some point in their work lives. But things got really interesting when we put a gender lens on those answers. Out of the respondents who identified as male, 17% explicitly stated to having experienced toxic positivity at the workplace. This number contrasts with the staggering 60% of female-identifying respondents who reported having experienced the phenomenon themselves.

These female-identifying participants shared experiences like the following:

"[Toxic positivity] manifested in the overall corporate discourse and especially in speeches from the leaders, which went from implicit hints such as 'let's be more optimistic, you should stop complaining, that's just the way things are' to threats like 'whoever's not satisfied or not able to handle the pressure can quit and go home'."

"I've experienced toxic positivity in one-on-one interactions with specific co-workers, but the more prevalent example is leadership being very resistant to any negative feedback or criticism and then complaining that employees need to be more positive - it's almost like leadership was pushing for toxic positivity and is disappointed when employees do not display [it]."

"[There was a] glaring feeling that [the company] wanted you to remain positive and instantly solve problems, then use your own time to emotionally recover from any setbacks you might have. I've only worked with one manager who recognized my emotions, sometimes before I even did, and always treated my emotional response as valid. Normally, managers don't leave room in conversation to talk about anything other than what needs to be done."

In my talk with Dr. Norman Farb, Associate Psychology Professor at the University of Toronto Mississauga, we discussed gender norms and how these might influence the perception and the effects of toxic positivity.

Norman Farb: You know, but we know a lot from the research literature, for instance, about how people deal with their stress or upset is very skewed by gender. It's much more likely for a male-identifying person to express negative emotions in an outward fashion, so to actually say like "I don't like this" or to do what's called an externalizing behavior, right? To go at someone and actually lean into interpersonal conflict in a way that other people can see, whereas women are much more likely to still experience the same degrees of suffering and distress but to express internalizing behaviors, where you try to work on yourself. And we talked before about how both of those are legitimate emotional regulation acts, but there is a bias there, right? That if I feel bad, I gotta figure out how to deal with that internally so it doesn't get out, as opposed to like "Well, if I feel bad it's because someone out in the world did something and I should fix what's happening in the world." Is definitely gendered. And of course these are just average results. You can have externalizing behaviors in a woman or internalizing behaviors in men, and who knows the literature on people who don't identify on one end of the spectrum, because that's just like a whole new frontier for research as well.

Simone Lima: So, one hypothesis here is that female-identifying respondents in my survey might be reporting more toxic positivity than male respondents because women displaying disagreeing opinions or negative emotions are seen as socially inadequate and, maybe, the corporate environment is less lenient with their reaction than it is when men display similar behaviors.

Norman Farb: And another thing that is often overlooked is when it's even safe to express and who you can express distress to. So, if someone really seems like they're not at all coming from the same place as you in terms of, like, gender, ethnicity, education level, like, how they speak, life experiences, you also have this sort of friction or discomfort around communication. So, I know that my faculty members who are people of color will always hear more about incidents of racism for instance than I will as a white professor, and I really try to be supportive and engaging, I might just not occur as safe, right? Especially because the perception will be like "oh, you haven't, you don't have the same type of experience as me, how can you identify enough to empathize to the point where you have real compassion and try to support me?", and if I can't put myself in that person's perspective at all, they're probably right. So, if you have a systematic imbalance in a lot of organizations where the people in

power are male, richer, higher-education, like, white people in positions of power, these people then will outgroup the people who they're supposed to be supporting, right? And, there is definitely work you can do to move past that initial visual of like "this person is not in my group", by doing things where you work together and learn that you have a lot of things in common that are overlapping, but the most salient things that show up initially are things like gender and ethnicity and age, and socio-economic class, social economic class and things like that that kinda create these mismatches. So, yeah, 100%, there is an implicit need to not overshare with people who don't seem like they are like you, and on top of that we have these extra internalized beliefs around who's allowed to express things versus not that is definitely gendered.

Simone Lima: In my own experience, there was a certain vibe to the corporate cultures where I had seen toxic positivity: companies that seemed to thrive on high-pressure and ambitious goals, that cultivated a sense of community among employees and, finally, that nudged or openly requested employees to change their negative feelings and thoughts about their work environment. My initial survey was also an attempt to find out if those three elements resonated with a wider community. I will now explore each of these three elements, starting with the high pressure work environment that can enable toxic positivity.

A recent [BBC article](#) discusses workers' fears around taking time off and how, in the United States this resulted in employees not using over 700 million days of paid time off to which they were entitled in 2018. This tendency also appeared in my own survey: 94% of respondents considered they worked in high-pressure environments and 66% stated feeling uncomfortable taking time off, calling in sick or even stopping working at the end of the day.

These numbers are already striking, but data gets even more revealing when we analyze these answers comparing the participants who said they had experienced toxic positivity in the workplace with those who had not. Respondents who reported toxic positivity were more likely to find their workload unmanageable. They were also more likely to feel uncomfortable taking time off and were more likely to worry about work when they were not working. In my personal experience, understaffed departments (often referred to by the huge understatement of "lean teams"), inevitably led to accumulated responsibilities. Pair that with very challenging goals and the idea that your tech venture is building something life-changing, and you have the perfect recipe for overwhelmed employees who constantly feel like they should be working a little bit more. Alexis, a young marketing professional who worked in the consumer packaged goods industry, felt the same and gave me some insight into high-pressure in a completely different industry from that in which I had worked.

Alexis: The company itself was very high pressure because of the type of industry that we were in. So food tends to be very fast moving, and then when you throw in something that is perishable, and that requires a cold chain, being refrigerated, that even adds up to a lot more pressure, right? So decisions have to be made very quickly, because if you take more than two days to decide what to do with a product on the shelf, that product can go bad. And there is, of course, the element of having very limited shelf-space.

Simone Lima: In her experience, small teams and ambitious targets were also accompanied by overt pressure from the executive team.

Alexis: And I specifically worked in marketing. I started my career in market research and in that the workflow was a lot more, was a lot slower. But the issue with that was there were three people working for 11 brands and a new category. Even though the role itself was not very fast moving just the workload was a lot. [The team] was supposed to be five people and there were always three of us

because someone kept quitting. And then when I moved on, I moved on to brand management and in there the high pressure, came from us always being called “the top line team”. So the marketing and sales team was always a top line team, the top line team meaning we are the ones who are responsible for bringing in revenues for the company.

Simone Lima: Alexis mentioned how being constantly referred to as the topline team made collaboration harder with other departments and added an additional layer of pressure to all the projects in which she was involved. I asked her whether the feeling of constant tension was also experienced by other team members.

Alexis: Literally my first day, I came in, (...) and there were three other trainees with me. I had just graduated undergrad and this was my first job, right?. There was an off-site event, which was supposed to be like a team-building exercise. One of the one of the team dynamics was "Describe the team using a movie", (...) So we just sat there and listened to everyone discussing their, their movie titles. So some of the movies that came up were "Hunger Games", "Mean Girls", "Troy", "Saw". Like, these were some of the movie titles that people use to describe the team dynamics and the environment in which the team lived, pretty much. So definitely something that was shared among all the marketing team.

Simone Lima: Another interviewee, Nikki, worked in an early-stage startup and, much like myself, saw the company's culture being built from scratch, with every new hire. When her venture brought on a new CEO to work on an important product launch, she experienced her workload increase in unimaginable ways.

Nikki: He was given all the resources, but at the same time he had this point that he wanted to prove that if the previous co-founders couldn't do it in a year, I can do it in less than a year. So the atmosphere used to be, like, fully charged. People used to come in at 9am in the morning and usually people would think of starting to leave the office by like 10:30pm, and that thought process would formalize by midnight, and then you had to be back in the office again. It started as "Oh, no, we're a new team, we are getting to know each other" kind of thing. But it did become a permanent feature of the new team. That you come in early, you get your doubts and everything cleared up in the morning and then you star, you complete your work, you eat there, you eat your lunch there, you eat your breakfast there, you eat your dinner, and you leave only when you realize "I know what I'm going to do for at least the next couple of days".

Simone Lima: In Nikki's case, she accumulated another function completely different from her product manager role – she became the office administrator. We discussed how much her gender might have influenced this additional position she took on.

Nikki: So you would imagine I was the only woman in the Bangalore office for the longest time, I worked there for four years. For three years, there was no other woman, so I started becoming the person who people [would] troubleshoot their problems to. So, for example, if a guy wants to get home early, a particular day, it's his birthday evening, or he wants to spend some time with his girlfriend, because she's in town, they would tell me, and I had to, then somehow get that person off early. So it just happened, like, if people didn't have enough time off, or they wanted something, or even if they wanted something in the office kitchen which was missing, they wanted more cookies, or they wanted something else, they would tell me because I was easier to talk to than anyone else. Then they started tapping into that information “oh, what do these people really need? How can we motivate them even more?”, right?

Simone Lima: Early 2000s studies point out how women tend to rely more on their social circles than men when they feel stressed. While male-identifying individuals follow the "fight-or-flight" model, female-identifying folks use a model called "tend-and-befriend" in stressful situations, meaning they tend to reach out for social support and also look to protect those around them. This could begin to explain Nikki's willingness to fill in the office administrator void, even though her regular role was already demanding.

In a 2015 study, Dr. Tara M. Chaplin investigated when in a human being's development cycle differences in emotional expressions begin to appear among genders. The author argues that one of the explanations could be that differences emerge based on gender "scripts" presented to infants, where girls are supposed to express more positive emotions, especially when they are in an unfamiliar group. Studies and meta-analysis show how girls' socialization to please and seem agreeable will lead them to, for example, smile more than boys to try to reduce social tension in interactions with strangers. Being afraid of being perceived as confrontational may also lead female-identifying workers to take more subdued paths in their workplaces.

My next interviewee, Anna, used to work with market research in a client-facing role and noted how not feeling like she could say "no" to clients' requests created a demanding, high-stress workplace.

Anna: So anytime the clients kind of asked for something, there had always been like a history of saying yes to everything, even if that meant, you know, going above and beyond the contractual agreement. And above and beyond your work day. So if they called you at 9 pm [and were] like "Hey, we have a really important meeting tomorrow. I don't know how to use the software, you know, how to use the software. So can you just pull me up this data?" But then it would never just be a data pull, it would just be like, oh, what does this mean? Can you get this? Can you get that? Because the clients had a software of their own, but most of the time they didn't know how to use it, because it was actually quite difficult to use, so it was also kind of like a tech problem. They found it too difficult to use, so they would just use our analysts like their personal analysts.

Simone Lima: Both Anna and I were in corporate environments which rewarded going above and beyond, but, at the same time, did not provide enough meaningful support and resources for employees to perform that well. Resources here include not only financial rewards, but also the time to ramp up and actually start contributing, for example. Now, I don't believe a high-pressure environment *always* leads to toxic positive practices at work. For some reason, I myself prefer working in faster-paced environments and love stretch goals. However, in my journey I have found that whenever there is constant urgency for delivering impactful results, toxic positivity can arise to disguise the undesirable consequences of this hustle culture that impacts our mental health and interferes with our personal time. And, finally, as women, it seems that we need to be especially vigilant about not allowing harmful patterns of socializing in groups or even unpaid labour to intrude on our work routines.

Next on my list of characteristics of workplaces that can become toxically positive is a heightened sense of community that blurs the line between employees' personal and professional lives. In my LinkedIn survey, most respondents reported valuing the community they found in their workplaces. When comparing those who were affected by toxic positivity to those who were not, toxic positivity victims stated being more invested in the community they had found - 56%, versus 44% of those who had not experienced toxic positivity. Brittany, an interviewee that works in a non-profit, shared how being in a small team increased her sense of affiliation and responsibility for what was being delivered.

Brittany: I think this registers differently with everybody. But I think, for myself, it comes from pressure on myself that I'm putting on myself to perform to a high standard. That's kind of how I've always been. So that's definitely something that I put on myself. It's also coming from being a really small team, I think you don't want to let your fellow teammates down. Because I know that if I am unable to do this, or if I don't deliver, it's gonna fall on someone else, who I work really closely with, and I know their workload. And I also know they don't have time or the energy to do this as well. So it's also that it's almost like you take one for the team in the hopes that they'll take one for you at one point, it's almost this reciprocal relationship of suffering, or of sacrificing your energy and your time.

Simone Lima: A [Gallup article](#) from 2018 strongly links having a best friend at work with employee performance. Given that their basic engagement needs are met, such as knowing what is expected of them, having best friends at work has been proven to increase employees' sense of affiliation with their team members. A greater degree of affiliation boosts individual commitment to work activities and impacts companies' profits, and even reduces safety incidents.

In my own experience, the tech startup environment has always been one that welcomes social activities and encourages people to get to know one another, which, according to Gallup, are part of the culture of friendship and inclusion that allows these work friendships to be formed. Now, looking back, I understand that not only did I feel more engaged and energized at work because of this friendly, party culture, having friends also allowed me to know what was going on in other departments, have a more holistic perspective of the company and the market, and even call in some favours when a difficult task needed to be delivered in record time. We don't have the time to delve into issues of power imbalances, peer pressure and drug abuse that can arise from this culture of partying in startups. I have personally experienced multiple occasions on which drinking alcohol felt mandatory for socialization and I believe this is an important topic for further research. You can find more resources on this topic in the notes from this episode ([Wired Article](#), ["Imposters" Podcast episode](#)).

Now, back to examining the environment that stimulated and rewarded personal connections. If you consider a pre-pandemic world in which commuting in a metropolitan area was still a requirement, I also did not have a whole lot of *time* to devote to friendships outside of work. All the way across the world, in another tech hub, Nikki went through something similar.

Nikki: With my parents, I would only get time to speak with them over the weekend, and regarding my personal health, I realized that because I was sitting on a place for so long and just looking at a laptop screen, I started getting a lot of headaches and back-aches. And I picked up gymming, I used to go to the gym, but my schedule was that I would get out of the office, the gym was very close to the office. The office was definitely the core point around which my life revolved. I really did not have enough time to have friends outside of work. These people were the only people I knew because I was spending 12 hours every day with them. I just didn't have that much energy to then go out and talk to other people. Apart from that when I when I picked up GMAT that was a big step for me because I had to create boundaries for myself for the first time to tell the team that after 8:30pm, I'm not going to be available, those are going to be silence hours for me, so if you have anything that you want for me to answer to you, if you get stuck somewhere, please make sure that that get to me before, say, 7:30 or 8pm.

Simone Lima: I asked her if she felt that creating those boundaries between work and her personal pursuits had impacted her in any way.

Nikki: To be off from work in that particular time, it hurt me in that particular year in a way that I did not get any kind of appraisal or any kind of positivity from him because he already siphoned me off into saying “Oh, your 100% retention is not in your work, because you're studying. So you're not really a good employee or whatever, you're not really putting in your best effort. You're just coming.” So, basically he got a chance to put me down every time. So yeah, it hurt me that vein, but it had to be done. Otherwise, I would have never been able to get out of that environment and take the next big step for me.

Simone Lima: My learning here is that a strong work community doesn't always lead to a toxic positive environment and it is comprehensible that employers invest in creating social interactions as a way to enhance corporate culture and possibly profits. However, in my journey and that of some of my interviewees, having a community creates affiliation and commitment to the group, and in an environment in which you feel like you can never set boundaries, toxic positivity can come up as a way to mask the amount of personal time you are giving up. The high-pressure, demanding work environment and the deep sense of affiliation led me down into a spiral of overworking, but constantly believing I was not contributing enough. This cognitive mismatch was then fertile ground for the subtle nudges and overt requests for me to change my emotions and thoughts for more positive ones, and keep focusing on work. Anna also went through a similar disconnect.

Anna: I think it's just, like, a very corporate thing to be very positive, right? Because the workplace was definitely toxic. People were very, very stressed out. People were leaving, it was really hard to hold on to people. That was one of the main problems, actually, that the analysts especially would leave so quickly, it was so much work to try and train someone else and just have them leave again. But at the same time the company was like “we're doing great, we're doing a great job”, “good job, everyone”, “forge on”, like “keep doing it, this is amazing, we're so happy!” and I'm like are we? Is anyone? This is really dystopian. And people would be trying, I mean they'd really try, put up Christmas decorations, and be like, “secret santa!”, the managers would do what they could to get morale up, but people were not happy, they weren't being treated well, and within the market they weren't really paid that well, so there wasn't a lot of incentive for them to stay.

Simone Lima: If the amount of work was overwhelming, why not look at the bright-side? The company was growing like never before. If I did not feel prepared to deal with a particular challenge, no worries, the company was going to pay for management training. I just had to be ready to take it in my own time, go to a 24-hour in person training during a weekend of their choosing, and still be expected to work first thing on Monday morning. If we had to attend an off-site that, again, was going to happen during a weekend, why complain? The party was going to be amazing! It was as if every time a personal boundary was crossed, my attention was systematically diverted to something that looked like a reward. Something that did not feel quite right, didn't always solve the initial problem, but was *supposed* to feel good and bring up a positive side I had allegedly been overlooking. In my LinkedIn survey, 87% of the participants who said they experienced toxic positivity at work stated having felt unspoken pressure to suppress their emotions. Only 30% of participants who haven't experienced toxic positivity stated feeling that kind of pressure. An unspoken pressure can be the reluctance to discuss certain situations, like in Brittany's case

Brittany: I didn't necessarily feel the need to put that positive spin, because quite frankly, I don't think I would have been able to. I think it was too stressful. And it was coinciding with a bunch of other things at the organization that were stressful for other people in their capacities. It was almost like everyone was kind of going through something at the same time. And so nobody was really putting pressure to spin it positively. I think that kind of came after the fact. So once we held the event, and once it was, from the outside, from viewers and from attendees, it was a success, it looked great, we had a really

great roster of speakers and a great agenda. So it looked like a success. But I think after the event, a lot of people, a lot of teammates in the organization wanted to talk about all the things that went wrong. And all of those those sort of critical elements that we definitely shouldn't have in place, or we need to improve the next time we want to do something like this. But because it was an outward success, I think a lot of the feedback and the conversation coming from leadership was "Oh, this was terrible, but it looked good. And it was a success. So ultimately, this was a positive experience." And because the event ends and you still have your full time job and other responsibilities, it kind of gets swept under the rug. And that's not necessarily something that you're always gonna get in business, but I think it's important with a close-knit team that is working on those sorts of initiatives to actually have those conversations. For employees, perceiving this resistance can end up creating fear of having candid conversations and asking for assistance, like in Alexis' case.

Alexis: It was through trial and error that I began to start feeling uncomfortable. So at first I would bring these up, like, I would bring these issues up with my manager, I would talk about it. And then after I noticed that, you know, they came up with these excuses, or blamed it on me, blamed it on the company, blamed it on it being a specific time of year, or anything like that, that's when I stopped because I began feeling uncomfortable. And I began feeling like I was complaining in a bad way, I was signaling that I couldn't take the workload, and that was in my head going to be perceived as something negative, like I couldn't handle my role.

Simone Lima: The pressures to change one's feelings or thoughts are not always subtle. They can also be overt requests in the workplace. In my survey, 56% of those who had witnessed toxic positivity said they had been directly asked by a leader to suppress or change what they were feeling, while just 22% of respondents who had not been subjected to toxic positivity reported having faced such requests. Another interviewee, Amy, was faced with the ask to accommodate and be more positive and empathetic in the face of repeated harassment from a colleague.

Amy: Colleague on the leadership team as well, male, as it were, roughly same stage of career, same age. Very negative experience with this individual. Constant interrupting, constant putting your ideas down. Anytime that you had questions it would be taken as some sort of "you're criticizing that person". You know kicking coffee table while I would be speaking, kicking the coffee table, the whole during my entire presentation. You know, I tried to work with the individual to say "Come on, enough". But after failed attempts over the course of two years I had to go to our boss. She acknowledged the behavior, and that the behavior was bad. But would spin it like, "I really don't think that he means to make you feel that way. Maybe if you could just be a little bit more understanding of his quirks, and a little bit more patient because, you know, he's actually afraid of you". So it was always what I can do to try to placate the bad behavior that is completely out of my control.

Simone Lima: Another term that has been gaining momentum is "gaslighting". A recent [Harvard Business Review article](#) emphasizes how gaslighting in the workplace can be particularly challenging because of its subtlety. Here's a direct quote: "While it is easy to spot [those] who scream, bully, and abuse publicly, gaslighting behavior is much more covert. (...) To make matters worse, [the] manipulative behaviors — while despicable and destructive — often don't break any specific company policies." A [quick internet search](#) will present gaslighting as a tactic in which a false narrative is presented, intentionally or not, and leads an individual or group to doubt their perceptions, and ultimately question their reality and become disoriented or distressed. These dynamics are accentuated even further when there are power imbalances in the relationship between the gaslighter and their audience, or when the audience is fearful of the losses associated with challenging the narrative presented, much like in a work setting. Paige L. Sweet, in [a 2019 study](#), presents gaslighting not from a psychological and individual standpoint, but from a sociological perspective.





The author defends that gaslighters usually mobilize structural inequalities and gender-based stereotypes, such as associating femininity with irrationality, to mold and manipulate one's reality. Although the study focuses on victims of domestic violence, the gendered lens through which they present this phenomenon can be useful for understanding what goes on at workplaces, and can start uncovering why 60% of my female respondents reported toxic positivity, while only 17% of male-identifying respondents did so.

We discussed in the first episode how toxic positivity can be used to transfer responsibility from a complex company structure to individual employees. My main learning in understanding the results from my survey, doing research and in talking to all of my interviewees, is that, although companies use these toxic positive shortcuts as a harmless motivation technique, motivation, mental health and productivity are not separate. For an employee to be sustainably motivated, yes, they need social connections in the workplace and interesting challenges, but they also have to be well, and trying to motivate employees at the expense of their mental health will likely backfire for companies.

In the next episode, we will discuss the aftermath of toxic positive encounters. We will also talk to a business scholar and understand what companies and leaders can do to create healthier workplaces that don't rely on toxic positivity to foster a sticky corporate culture and a productive environment.

See you soon!