

# Outsmart

*Experts reveal easy ways to trade forced optimism for true joy*

**A**fter months of stress, you feel a tangle of emotions over how much our lives have changed. This turmoil, however, is hidden from view, as you push down your anxiety and uncertainty and smile for the world, telling yourself, *Everything will be fine*. But psychologists say that stifling these difficult feelings can trigger “toxic positivity,” a false facade that creates a disconnect between our emotions and our authentic selves, making it harder to find true solace from stress.

“The cultural narrative telling us to ‘be positive,’ makes us believe we constantly have to strive to be happy,” says Susan David, Ph.D., author of *Emotional Agility*. And while this intention may not sound so bad, research tells a different story: “When being happy is our goal, we’re dramatically *less* so over time,” asserts David, “because unrealistic expectations cause us to suppress emotions like regret and anger, which help us learn and grow.”

This “positivity pressure” is also harder on women, says Lisa Feldman Barrett, Ph.D., author of *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*. “When a woman expresses a negative emotion like anger, people tend to infer that’s part of *who* she is—i.e., she’s an angry person. Whereas when a man expresses emotion, others assume it’s *circumstances* making him feel that way.” The result: Women are often conditioned to “put on a happy face.”

Ignoring our feelings is more than just stressful: “It also has a physiological cost, similar to a ‘metabolic tax,’” says Feldman Barrett. “When we suppress our true feelings, we expend extra energy—this ‘tax’ adds up.” Indeed, false positivity is downright draining. Here, strategies to help you embrace your emotions and find *genuine* joy.



# 'positivity pressure'

## FRUSTRATED?

### TURN THE PAGE TO FIND PEACE

Your sadness over this “new normal,” from the changes to your routine to the loss of the future you expected, has morphed into something you dare not admit to: *anger*. Says David, “Because it’s seen as a ‘bad’ emotion, especially in women, we cover it up.”

**Rather than see it as “negative,” look at anger as *data* you can learn from.** “Anger is a signpost, helping you get to the root of what you’re truly feeling,” says David. To decode the message it’s sending, picture a two-sided paper, she suggests. On one side, imagine the word *anger*, then turn it over and ask, *What value is this signaling?* Your anger over how the pandemic has kept you from the volunteering work you love, for example, shows just how much you value your community. “Tough emotions reveal what you hold dear—let anger lead you to *act*.” That could be anything from supporting a local fundraiser online to checking in on an elderly neighbor. Indeed, valuing the *values* underlying anger helps you “turn the page” to authentic positivity.

## DISAPPOINTED?

### TRY ON THIS ACCESSORY

You had every detail of your granddaughter’s birthday party planned out... then new COVID-19 cases started to rise, and you settled for a car parade. *I should be happy we were able to celebrate at all*, you tell yourself. But you’re still disappointed, not only about the situation but in *yourself*, as if it’s your fault.

**Instead of kicking yourself for what you can’t change, pat yourself on the back for the *realistic* goals you’ve met**, urges psychotherapist Jennifer Shannon, author of *The Anxiety Virus*. And she means that literally: The more tactile your affirmations, the easier they are to believe. In fact, she asks patients to put on a “compassion bracelet” to mark moments of self-kindness: Whenever you give yourself credit for what you’re accomplishing, move the bracelet from your left to your right wrist. “This serves as a tangible reminder that you’re doing your best,” she says, “That acknowledgement alone is linked with success and *real* happiness.”

## LONELY?

### CONNECT TO A HIGHER POWER

Though you may now be able to get together with friends—at least in small groups—you still feel a sense of isolation you can’t shake. Loneliness is so difficult, we don’t know how to talk about it. But just realizing how common it is can help you stop pretending everything is “just fine.”

**The key to instantly feeling less alone? Focus on something that brings you awe.** Pastor Max Lucado, author of *Anxious for Nothing*, explains that a deep feeling of wonder—be it from gazing at a vibrant sunset, walking below towering trees or simply listening to beautiful birdsong—can help us feel connected to a higher power and remind us that we are not alone. Says Lucado, “For me, God’s love is reflected in the beauty all around us—and experiencing a sense of awe opens our hearts to that love and helps us feel that moment is just *for us*.” Indeed, awe is also study-proven to melt loneliness and stress by eliciting what psychologists call the “small self effect,” which broadens our perspective and shrinks our worries.

## FEELING A BIT OF ENVY?

While your husband has been furloughed, your best friend’s partner just found a new job. Of course, you tell her how happy you are for her—but you can’t help but also be a bit envious, an uncomfortable emotion you quickly push aside, pretending the only thing you feel is pure joy. “Envy is an offshoot of shame,” reveals clinical psychologist Mary Lamia, Ph.D., author of *Emotions!*

*Making Sense of Your Feelings*. Yet it’s nothing to be ashamed of. “It tells you what you want—it’s projected onto someone else but it has nothing to do with them; it’s just a trigger.”

**Let envy help you discover the goals that’ll enrich your life.** “Acknowledge your feelings by saying, ‘I’m happy for them, *even though I don’t yet have what they have,*’” urges Lamia. This simple shift validates your desires

## SHARE YOUR ‘WEALTH’

without diminishing your happiness for others. Another way to shine light on the shadow of envy: Try a random act of kindness. “Giving to others—when there’s no expectation of reciprocity—instantly enhances positive emotions,” adds Feldman Barrett. And since envy fools us into believing there’s something incomplete about our lives, giving is “proof positive” of just how much you have to offer.