

Here's kind of a weird thing. You know, I don't know about you, but sometimes when I'm suffering, the last thing I need to hear from a friend or a loved one is optimism. There are a lot of examples of it. It really depends on the situation. But, you know, "Hey, it'll get better, Michael. Give it time. Time heals all wounds. You know, it could be worse. It is what it is. Shit happens for a reason, Michael." These are examples of what's known as, and what I think is appropriately known as, toxic positivity. And I just hate it.

But what's so bad about someone being optimistic? I mean, these are usually people that care about me, want to help me feel better. I appreciate their motives. Might be, probably are, quite genuine and altruistic. So what are they doing that's so wrong?

I think I hate it because when I'm suffering or feeling distressed and somebody responds with what feels to me like a bromide or some placating aphorism, some comment that the person thinks, hopes, will lift my spirits, it almost always makes me feel worse because, however well-intentioned these responses might be, they make me feel a bit misunderstood and even a bit guilty.

So first, it's hard not to sense, whether it's accurate or not, that the person doesn't really want to hear all the nitty gritty details about my damn suffering.

You know, the painful ways that I'm experiencing and metabolizing and trying to understand my predicament. And I'm led to wonder: are they seeking to lift my spirits, or am I kind of bumming them out such that they need to lift their own spirits?

And further, you know, related to this, is that I often hear a certain subtext in these upbeat responses that suggests that my suffering is making that person feel uncomfortable and helpless, maybe. And that, therefore, they're trying to get rid of it or help me get rid of it as quickly as possible.

So I'm left feeling a bit guilty, like I'm burdening or draining my audience. And the combination of feeling not quite seen and then guilty about wanting to be seen, for me, is a bit of a toxic cocktail.

So I was thinking: what's a better response or way of relating to one's suffering or the suffering of others, someone else, someone you care about? Well, it has to start with some version, I think, of a tired concept but an important one called acceptance.

Sigmund Freud once wrote this quote: "I don't doubt it would be easier for fate to take away your suffering than it would be for me. But you'll see for yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in turning your hysterical misery into common unhappiness."

Now, this sounds like Freud's pessimistic, certainly in his therapeutic aspirations. But I think instead, at his best, he's saying something different. He's saying that our experiences in life of disappointments and frustrations, losses, setbacks, and hurts are inevitable and hardwired into everyday human life. And that the challenge is whether we can learn to relate to them in a way

that doesn't make us feel so defeated and despairing about our future, so hopeless, as if we don't have any freedom to grow or ever master trauma in ways that would allow us to see some sunlight in our lives.

Instead, I think there's wisdom in what Victor Frankl once called tragic optimism, by which he meant the search for meaning amid the inevitable tragedies of human existence.

You know, in my own clinical work, I sometimes talk with patients about the fact that, you know, their aspiration of reaching some ultimate state of joy and happiness isn't really realistic, and that this fantasy is not, nor should it be, their vision of even a good life.

You see, instead, I try to help them define and focus more on their values, the avenues in which the best versions of themselves can emerge and find meaning and purpose. And even if traveling down those paths is sometimes accompanied by strain and frustration and... In other words, I make it clear that our therapeutic goal isn't to achieve some rainbow state of constant happiness, but that I want to help them uncover and overcome the internal beliefs and inhibitions that limit their freedom to grow and more confidently align their lives with their values.

You know, Buddhism teaches that, what do they say, pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. And maybe the Buddha meant that we can't avoid pain, but with awareness we have some freedom to mitigate suffering.

Well-intended, which they usually are, but also trite, in my view, efforts to help someone "happy up" or look at the bright side of things not only fail to reduce suffering, but risk making it worse through denial, minimization, invalidation.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that, in the rawness of his own grief, "The hollow comfort of forced cheerfulness does not lighten the weight of suffering. It only makes the mourner feel more alone."

So I think it's, you know, the road to suffering, it turns out, is paved not just with bad intentions, but with good vibes.