

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Maisie Hill

The Maisie Hill Experience with Maisie Hill

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

Hi, this is Devon, one of Maisie's podcast producers. Maisie isn't feeling well this week, so she asked our team to pick one of her previous episodes to re-air. We decided to go with episode eight, Positivity Pressure. Enjoy.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author of *Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Our topic for today is positivity. I am all for positive thinking. If you've listened to other episodes then you know I'm a fan of using mindset and thought work as tools in life. But I would say there's a common misconception about thought work that I want to speak about today and that's that it's about thinking positively and using positive affirmations. Affirmations is not a term that I personally like to use, affirmations are thoughts. So I like to stick with thoughts, but whatever works for you.

My experience personally and professionally is that thought work is actually there to help us explore and question our thoughts. And to help us feel our emotions, not just jump to rainbows and unicorns and everything, so most of the time we just think things without questioning whether they are true or if they're useful. And creating opportunities to purposefully look at what we're thinking is helpful in and of itself. Notice how neither of these things, exploring your thoughts and feeling your feelings are about skipping to a happy place.

It can absolutely be used to create positive results in our lives and there are times where thinking more positively, or at least in a more neutral way is super helpful. But today what I want to talk about is when positive thinking isn't appropriate. And I'm going to give you a current example from my personal life as well as a phenomenon that I have observed in my clients who are trying to conceive. So this is a topic that I'm particularly passionate about because it really annoys me when people try to rush me out of feeling sad about something.

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

And lately I have been feeling sad, there are a few reasons for this but a big one is that it's been a while since I saw my brother and his family, and my sister-in-law is pregnant. And at the start of this latest lockdown I made peace with the realisation that it would be unlikely that I would see them before their second baby arrives. And that I also wouldn't be able to visit them and their new baby. So I've been sitting with that periodically and allowing myself like now to feel the sadness that comes from thinking about how much I miss them and wish that I could see them.

So, I've been processing a fair bit of sadness recently but I don't want to change that, would I jump at the chance to see them if I could? 100%. But even if the British Government in all their wisdom changed the rules tomorrow and I was able to visit them I think we could question whether it's a good idea to actually visit someone who is pregnant, or who has a new baby in times like these. But what I really mean by I don't want to change that is I don't want to change the sadness that I'm experiencing because it's completely appropriate.

I miss them and I'm sad about not seeing them so I feel sad. I have no need to change that by trying to just crowbar in some happy thoughts in an attempt to get out of feeling negative emotion. I mean really I'm not a fan of calling them negative emotions because no emotion is negative, they're just emotions. Some might be more uncomfortable and we might not want to feel them or we might try to resist or avoid them. But ultimately they're all feelings and they're all valid. They have their place.

So this is a topic that's been on my mind for many years. The notion of positivity came up a lot in my work when I was working with clients who were trying to conceive, or who were pregnant, or had just given birth. What I noticed happening was that my clients would put themselves under tremendous pressure to think positively and feel positive all the time. And that's completely understandable.

And we have to explore why that is because you're in what I would say is a hormonally vulnerable time because you're taking more hormones that you'd ever produce naturally, this is if you're undergoing the IVF process.

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

So you're super charged up and responding to these hormones in all sorts of, let's say interesting ways.

And there'll also be a degree of pressure too because an assisted cycle is often, you know, people often view it as a high stake situation. And by that I mean you've gone through an intense physiological and psychological process which is also likely to be one that you've invested in financially, maybe it's the only cycle you can do through your NHS Trust.

And there will also be other costs and losses associated with being on a fertility journey. So this more often than not is a full on process to go through. And if you've been through it or you know someone who's been through it then you know what I mean. And then add to this well intending magazine articles, books, healthcare professionals, partners, relatives, maybe even colleagues telling you to think positively, as if you need to be reminded.

And of course because most of this process is something that happens to us, it's understandable that you might want to latch onto something that's under your control, how you think. But have you ever tried to think positive thoughts all day long? It's not possible unless maybe you're on drugs that make you feel amazing, but even if you are, there's definitely going to be, so what the fuck is going on freak out moments. And taking drugs is not a strategy that I suggest or endorse especially if you're going through IVF.

But it's also a 100% normal for your brain to focus on all the bad stuff that might happen, especially if this is a process that's familiar to you. This is just how the human brain works. And it's actually what's allowed us to evolve and thrive as a species because we remember pain and suffering that we've experienced so that we are cautious the next time we find ourselves in a similar situation.

But what I would see in my clients is they're not meeting the required level of positivity in order to support human life. Not that that's actually specified anywhere and beating themselves up for not being able to sustain this level

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

of positive thinking. Essentially any negative thoughts they had they would make the presence of them mean that they had failed.

And that if the round of IVF was unsuccessful often what I'd see is they'd end up blaming themselves usually in numerous ways. But one of the reasons would be that they didn't think positively enough, which of course is not true. Let's just put that one to bed right now. So there's the pressure to maintain positivity despite whatever you're going through then beating yourself up for any non-positive thoughts that are there because you're human.

I mean is it reasonable to expect someone going through this process to be in a fantastically happy place? I don't think it's normal to expect that for a human being ever especially when you're going through assisted reproduction. There's already a sense of failure usually, lack of trust in the body, and you start heaping on guilt and self-flagellation just because you can't keep on the positive thought train. It's just not a great situation to be in because it's just not going to happen staying in that positive happy place. Your brain is not designed to work this way.

Your brain is designed to be on the lookout for threats and what could go wrong, and that's completely okay. I think it's far more helpful to acknowledge what you're going through and process your emotions as they come up, which they certainly will, and by maybe finding neutral thoughts rather than positive ones which I'll get onto in a minute.

I would also see this in my clients who just had babies when they'd had a difficult or traumatic birth but were forcing themselves to focus on the positive. And that is a way of responding to trauma by the way so there's no judgment, sometimes that's exactly what someone needs to do in order to protect themselves at the time.

But they might also have people around them, healthcare professionals and loved ones who say things along the lines of, "All that matters is a healthy baby", which I mean I could do a whole episode with me ranting about how problematic a statement like that is. But it's basically saying,

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

“Hey, don't worry about all the shit things that have just happened to you, you have a baby, let's be happy.” I mean I like to think that most of the time when this happens it's because those people aren't equipped and maybe they're having their own nervous system response.

But what I'd love is for whatever someone wants to express after giving birth that they have a safe space to do so and to process what's happened because even when birth is smooth and straightforward it needs to be processed. We can also think about how we as a society or as parents raise kids. Are we able to let them express their emotions? Or are we quick to distract and try and cheer them up or offer them a sweet to stop crying? The same goes for us as adults too.

When was the last time someone allowed you to express your emotion without trying to hurry you up or just stop you altogether? I mean another little rant, but the whole positive vibes only is a concept that I'm just not onboard with. It's dismissive and harmful. I am all for positive thoughts when they're appropriate.

Let's say you're in the habit of talking shit about yourself then you'd probably have a better experience of being you if you thought kinder thoughts about yourself. But in some situations it's not where we need to go, not until we've processed what's going on, actually felt our feelings and reached a place of resolution by completing a stress response, that's when we're finding ourselves in one. From there you might decide that you want to think about bringing in some positivity somehow. But you also might decide that it's not appropriate to, at least at that time.

So here's the deal, usually when someone suggests thinking positively they're faced with the challenge of getting to the ultimate most positive thoughts. But going from a negative thought to a super positive one comes with its challenges because it can be too far fetched, too far away from how you're currently thinking.

And this is what I'd see in my fertility clients. They would be thinking about all the things that could go wrong at every step of the way. They would think

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

that this wouldn't work for them. And therefore they'd be feeling worried, overwhelmed and anxious. Then they would judge themselves for thinking those thoughts and worry that they'd affected the outcome. I was so glad, by the way, that they were coming to me because acupuncture is great at reducing stress. And that, you know, when you're ruminating on things, acupuncture is great at nipping that in the bud.

Anyway what they'd then do is try and jump to the most positive thought possible like it's easy for my body to be pregnant or something along those lines. Basically expecting your brain to be able to forget everything else and be all rainbows and unicorns. Sometimes in some situations that will work for you, maybe if you're in a certain phase of your cycle then you might be able to reach for a thought like that and believe it.

But there will be lots of time where your brain puts up resistance because it's too much of a jump for it to get used to which is what I would observe a lot in my fertility patients. So instead of this I would recommend finding a neutral thought that's still an improvement from where they currently were and something that is more doable and more believable than kind of the ultimate thought.

For instance if we were staying with this fertility theme you might redirect your brain from any doom and gloom and think a thought along the lines of IVF works sometimes. Can you see how that's pretty neutral? So when you pick a thought like this it is an improvement but it also allows for the fact that it doesn't always work, which means that your brain doesn't have to resist that thought. It's acceptable to it which is ultimately what we want.

Maybe, maybe from there you might decide to take another step and think that it's possible that this will work, but you don't have to. And I recommend hanging out wherever feels best to you and doesn't result in pressure, worry or any kind of stress. You just want to be wherever is helpful to you.

Okay, so here's the summary from today. Please don't pressure yourself to think positively when what you really need to do is process and feel wherever you are, sadness, grief, disappointment, anxiety, give yourself the

Ep #153: When Positive Thinking Isn't Appropriate

gift of actually allowing those feelings to be there instead of judging them and thinking that they shouldn't be there and judging yourself. I spend a lot of time teaching my clients how to process emotion and it makes a huge difference.

Okay, next up, decide if you actually want to think and feel any differently. You may not, like the example I gave about my brother and his family. And you'll know what's best for you so trust that.

Okay, after that, make a quick call on whether you're ready to go to a positive thought and if you are, great, figure that one out. If not then the next step is to find a neutral thought that your brain can get onboard with.

Okay folks, that's my thoughts on positivity. I hope it's been helpful. And I'll see you next week.

Hey, if you love listening to this podcast then come and check out my membership, *The Flow Collective*, where you get my best resources and all the coaching you need to transform your inner and outer life. Sign up to the waitlist at theflowcollective.co/join, and I'll see you in the community.