

Toxic Positivity

(Being positive isn't always a helpful solution to life's problems.)

■ by Katherine DeYoung, MA, LCPC, LMHC



As a counselor...scratch that...As a child of God, I know how difficult it can be to sit with someone who is going through a hard time. I so often find that my heart yearns for dear friends and family members to feel better about a situation, to see themselves through a different lens, and to receive hope that God hasn't had the last word. When sitting with these friends, I want their resolution and happy ending to come quickly. Based on this, I bypass their current mood and go straight for the solution. However their response doesn't seem to show that I offered any help at all. In fact, sometimes I am told that I have made things worse. Let's take a look at a few examples before continuing.

Example #1 - The Teenage Girl

Crying to you in dismay over her appearance and weight, your 16-year-old, 110-pound daughter shares with you that she is fat and hates the way she looks, as she can't even stand to look at herself in the mirror. What do you do?

Example #2 - The Barren Woman

Over the years, your friend has shared with you her struggle with infertility and the fact that her dreams aren't being fulfilled. She questions why God hasn't provided and doubts about the future. What do you say?

Example #3 - The Passed-Up Employee

Your neighbor has worked so hard and faithfully at his job for the past 15 years and again has been passed up for a promotion. He is discouraged by this and doesn't know what to do. How do you encourage him?

These are everyday situations that will cross our paths. As Christians, I believe it is wise for us to learn how to approach people experiencing difficult times in loving and helpful ways. Key word there is HELPFUL. I will give us all the benefit of a doubt in assuming that when we speak "words of encouragement" we are doing so out of love, but we need to recognize that our well-meaning positivity is not always helpful or necessary.

In Example #1 it is so easy to respond to the tearful teenager with the words, "No you're not sweetie, you are not fat. You are so beautiful". These words can be said from the heart with absolute sincerity, but from my experience they aren't helpful and often aren't believed. In Example #2, you might be inclined to encourage your friend to "Be positive" that a successful pregnancy is right around the corner or to quote bible verses that "God knows the desires of your heart". Again, this may be a genuine attempt to

- Continued on Page 2 -

Article taken from the Mar | Apr 2020 issue of *PRESSING ON*, a Publication of Chicago Christian Counseling Center
Chicago Christian Counseling Center has locations throughout Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana

www.chicagochristiancounseling.org

708.845.5500 | info@chicagochristiancounseling.org

facebook.com/ChicagoChristianCounseling | Text CCCC to 22828 to join our email list

Promoting health and wholeness through professional counseling, consultation and education from a Christian perspective.

Toxic Positivity

(Being positive isn't always a helpful solution to life's problems.)

■ by Katherine DeYoung, MA, LCPC, LMHC

- Continued from Page 1 -

encourage your dear friend, but it isn't found to be helpful in the moment. Finally, in Example #3, you are desperate to encourage your neighbor and share that he should be "Thankful for the job that he has and positive about what's ahead". This sounds nice, but probably isn't what your neighbor wanted to hear.



So, if those responses aren't helpful...what is?

Maybe next time, before you give one of these quick responses you can take a step back and follow this 2-step process.

SIT. Before heading into "Fix-It Mode" take a moment or maybe a few moments and sit with your loved one where they are at. Sit in the ugliness. Sit in the heartache. Sit in the discouragement.

EMPATHIZE. Show them you understand how they are feeling, without trying to change how they feel.

If you look for it, you will find a hint of grief in all of the scenarios mentioned above. We need to be sensitive to grief in all of its forms, so watch out for when a loved one could be grieving the loss of a job, the loss of a dream, or the loss of self-esteem. Grief doesn't just come with the loss of a loved one. You wouldn't tell someone who just lost their parent to "Be Positive"- you express empathy and say that you are sorry for their loss. The same applies here.

Don't get me wrong. I understand the importance of positive thinking. What I am questioning is the need for us to be positive all the time and the belief that being positive will solve all of our problems. That's simply not true, nor do I think it is biblical. There are so many examples in the Bible of people crying out to God in distress, such as David when he was being chased by Saul intent on killing him or Jesus crying out to God to "remove this cup from (him)". If you look in the Bible, these emotions weren't immediately resolved or depreciated. They were heard and cared for by a loving God.

Before rushing in with the positive side and pointing out godly hope, pray about your timing. Depending on the situation and the person, these comments may fall on deaf ears. Comments such as "That sounds frustrating", "My heart breaks for you" and "I can understand how you would be discouraged" may be more welcomed. We need to figure out how to provide helpful validation and hope for our loved ones without straying into the land of "toxic positivity". Don't miss out on opportunities for deep connection and understanding by quickly trying to make things better. Afterwards, keep an eye out for God's timing and the right words to say when your loved one is ready to hear more. ■

Katie DeYoung is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. She sees clients in our Evergreen Park and Orland Park, IL locations.



Article taken from the Mar | Apr 2020 issue of *PRESSING ON*, a Publication of Chicago Christian Counseling Center
Chicago Christian Counseling Center has locations throughout Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana

www.chicagochristiancounseling.org

708.845.5500 | info@chicagochristiancounseling.org

facebook.com/ChicagoChristianCounseling | Text CCCC to 22828 to join our email list

Promoting health and wholeness through professional counseling, consultation and education from a Christian perspective.