

Suffering

Self-Coaching Guide

It is inevitable that we will all face suffering at certain times in our lives. Since challenges and setbacks can't be avoided, the only thing we can control is how we respond to them. Failing to accept that we are facing a serious crisis has been shown to have a detrimental effect on our mental health. Going into denial and suppressing our negative emotions (e.g. sadness, fear, stress, anxiety, loneliness) actually makes us feel worse. So, if accepting our feelings and facing suffering is a better option for our wellbeing, how can we approach doing this in healthy and helpful way?

How can I handle suffering in my life?

A positive mindset can help us cope with a crisis. Some positivity may encourage us to take a step back, re-evaluate our life, get things into perspective, appreciate what we have, and be grateful for it. However, not accepting our feelings and being unrelentingly optimistic – known as '*toxic positivity*' – is unrealistic and doesn't make our negative emotions go away. The reality is that toxic positivity just makes us think that having negative emotions is a weakness and we are a failure, leaving us feeling guilty and shameful about our real feelings. It is important to recognise that it's OK to experience negative emotions; everyone has these types of feelings from time to time.

By contrast, a more authentic mindset is '*tragic optimism*'. This approach promotes the philosophy that there is hope and meaning to be found in life while also acknowledging the existence of loss, pain and suffering. Tragic optimism suggests there is room to experience both the good and the bad, and that we can grow from each. It offers a perspective on suffering that helps us handle crises with more resilience and grow as a result of them.

To be tragically optimistic is to accept there is a middle ground between a crisis crushing our spirit, and suffering and setbacks giving us an opportunity to learn something new. This could include reframing an event so that something stressful becomes a challenge rather than a threat. Or, it could involve a situation prompting us to think about something we had been overlooking or avoiding in our life. Additionally, tragic optimism has the potential to prepare us better for what comes post crisis.

Some people who suffer a trauma can have difficulty coping with the situation and may develop *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. This can be the case for many people who rely on toxic positivity. Encouraging people to be optimistic and grateful when going through suffering doesn't encourage growth afterwards. In contrast, some people find that trauma gives them a new perspective on life; this is known as *Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)*. Tragic optimism helps facilitate PTG. Research has shown that PTG can occur after a traumatic event in five possible ways: relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life.

Embracing tragic optimism helps our personal development by accepting the negative feelings and making the effort to feel comfortable with them. We may even learn some new things about ourselves: what we truly value, how we want to live, or who we really want to be after the suffering ends.

*"It is here that we encounter the central theme of existentialism:
to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering."*

Viktor E. Frankl

More Information

M +44 (0)7711 856804 **E** hello@paulhollywell.com **L** www.linkedin.com/in/paulhollywell **W** www.paulhollywell.com