

POSITIVITY AND HOPE IN THE ERA OF COVID-19



“Just stay positive.” We frequently hear these words when up against a challenge; but in many cases, the well-intentioned message of encouragement can instead feel hollow and trite. After all, how can one stay positive when there are substantial health, safety, and economic threats looming over us? Or while we are experiencing individual and collective grief? Wouldn't that make us naïve or ignorant, all the while perpetuating cycles of denial? Wouldn't it be like putting a band-aid on a bullet wound?

In actuality, the concept of positivity is far more sophisticated, requiring an advanced level of emotional muscle that does not often get flexed. The good news is - like any other skill - it can be taught, cultivated and implemented regularly to act as a buffer against the psychological and emotional damage that a pandemic creates within society.

Furthermore, by honing this skill, you are helping to combat and dispel harmful, reductive stereotypes that have historically surrounded the construction industry. As one construction project manager put it, “Industry professionals are recognizing that it's time to turn away from the ‘check your feelings at the door’ mentality.” We agree - and recognize that this outdated mentality has contributed to higher than average rates of depression, anxiety, addiction and suicidality within the field. The future of the construction industry, in part, relies on having healthy workers who embrace a progressive attitude about emotional wellness. By doing so, you help to uphold the integrity of the trades.

So, how is there more to positivity than what meets the eye? First, let's explore what positivity is *not*, in order to ultimately better understand what it truly is. Positivity is *not* ignoring pain. Positivity is *not*

pretending awful things aren't happening, when they are. Positivity is *not* feeling happy all of the time. Positivity is *not* smiling, when you want to cry. Positivity is *not* minimizing legitimate struggles.

Positivity is, however, realistic optimism. Positivity is trusting that even in the face of a challenge, better days are ahead. Positivity is an inner wisdom that heartens you to bravely weather storms, knowing that they pass. Positivity is a philosophy that rewards you with favorable outcomes by embracing the idea of favorable outcomes to begin with. Positivity is a way of co-signing on a brighter future by believing that a better future exists in the first place. This is because deciding on positivity encourages you to take ownership and agency over the direction of your life. It's a way of being that asks you to look your challenges square in the eye and then invites you to rise to meet them, intuitively knowing that doing so will be worth it. You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control how you respond to it; and positivity is a cognitive framework that allows you to respond to it constructively. The sophistication of positivity is in knowing that the sum of a bright outlook is greater than its parts; that it's more than "just smiling."

It doesn't end there. The word that has been noticeably absent from the equation thus far, the tool that powers us through from adversity to prosperity, is hope. Hope is a plan, a strategy. Positivity is an attitude; hope is a behavior. Positivity is the car; hope is the fuel for the engine. The two work in partnership, as one without the other will not get you very far. Without positivity, one will remain bitter. Without hope, one will remain stagnant.

How can you practice hope, especially while surrounded by so much uncertainty and suffering? Focus on what is going right, instead of what is going wrong. What's working; what's in order? Choose to stay empowered, rather than helpless. It is true that we could each compile a list of dozens of things that are outside of our control right now (the economy, the behavior of others, social distancing guidelines, and so on). However, those are not the things you should be dwelling endlessly on. Instead, invest your energy in working on things that are within your control, no matter how small. Accomplish what is accomplishable (like regulating your own emotions and behaviors, keeping up with your hygiene, making to-do lists and following through with them, etc.), and relinquish the rest. By investing your energy in thoughts and behaviors that are within your control, you build your sense of power. By investing your energy in ruminating over things that are outside of your control, you lose your sense of power.

Seek balance in your days, and do so by managing your stress (see MAP's guide on Stress Management and COVID-19). Practice mindfulness by not overthinking the future or past, as doing so breeds anxiety and depression, as well as hinders productivity. Identify the coping strategies that work for your personality (relaxation or calming techniques, physical recreation, seeking support in a loved one, authentic communication, and so on). Implement these coping strategies as often as possible. Look for

opportunities to grow and bounce back, rather than reasons to stay down and stuck. If you are at risk for losing a loved one, what advice do you think they would dispense? How would they encourage you or invite you to tap into your resiliency surrounding the loss? Let the knowledge of resiliency and survivorship since the beginning of humankind, in and of themselves, be a compass. As a species, we always overcome. Let this be reflected in your personal narrative as well. Know that our world will recover, bit by bit, day by day, and so too, will we. As individuals, and as an industry. Connect with your support network, and look for role models who have found solutions. Identify individuals, whether it be public figures or those you know personally, who model virtuosity and effective problem-solving techniques. How has this person approached the pandemic? What are they doing that you can adopt in your own life to help propel you forward?

Perform acts of kindness, and allow others to offer you kindness in return. In addition to these acts of decency, are you able to find any other ironically favorable byproducts of this critical period? Ancient wisdom tells us that with each crisis, there is also opportunity. Is it possible that our overall sense of humanity – our brotherhood and sisterhood - will ultimately grow at the end of all of this? Are you finding a sense of solidarity within your home, community or local union? If not, can you be the one to work towards building it? Or perhaps, instead, you have picked up a new hobby, have learned something new or have worked towards a personal goal as a result of this experience. Practice gratitude and actively seek out joy. After all, it is true that the presence of COVID-19 in and of itself does not eliminate the existence of happiness, positivity, and hope. It's just a matter of being able to look for it in the right places - and allowing it to grow once you find it.

If it feels as though positivity and hope are inaccessible to you at this time, you are not alone and we are here to help. Contact IUBAC's Member Assistance Program (MAP) for free, confidential support and guidance.



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