

The 'whatever you do, stay positive' approach can close down the very conversations we most need when life is tough

Psychologist Paul D'Alton explains that placing too much emphasis on a positive mindset could ultimately be counter-productive. Instead, the focus should be on clear thinking to better deal with the here and now

Go into any book shop and you will see shelves lined with books about positive thinking: titles that claim the power of positive thinking to banish anxiety, defeat depression, make lots of money, help us find true love and eternal happiness. There are even some that suggest positive thinking can cure cancer. We are essentially being told that the secret to human happiness, wealth and good health is to 'stay positive' – at all costs. But this is not true. And this untruth is often directed at those who are most vulnerable; and when you have cancer you're probably at your most vulnerable.

Very often what I have seen, as a clinical psychologist with over 20 years of practice, is how the relentless emphasis on 'staying positive' can result in emotional isolation and loneliness at a time when emotional connection is so important.

Sadly, this relentless emphasis on staying positive gets in the way of the closeness and warmth that us humans need most when we are going through something difficult like a cancer diagnosis. There is emerging research evidence that supports this idea that says the force to 'stay positive' might actually be doing us harm.

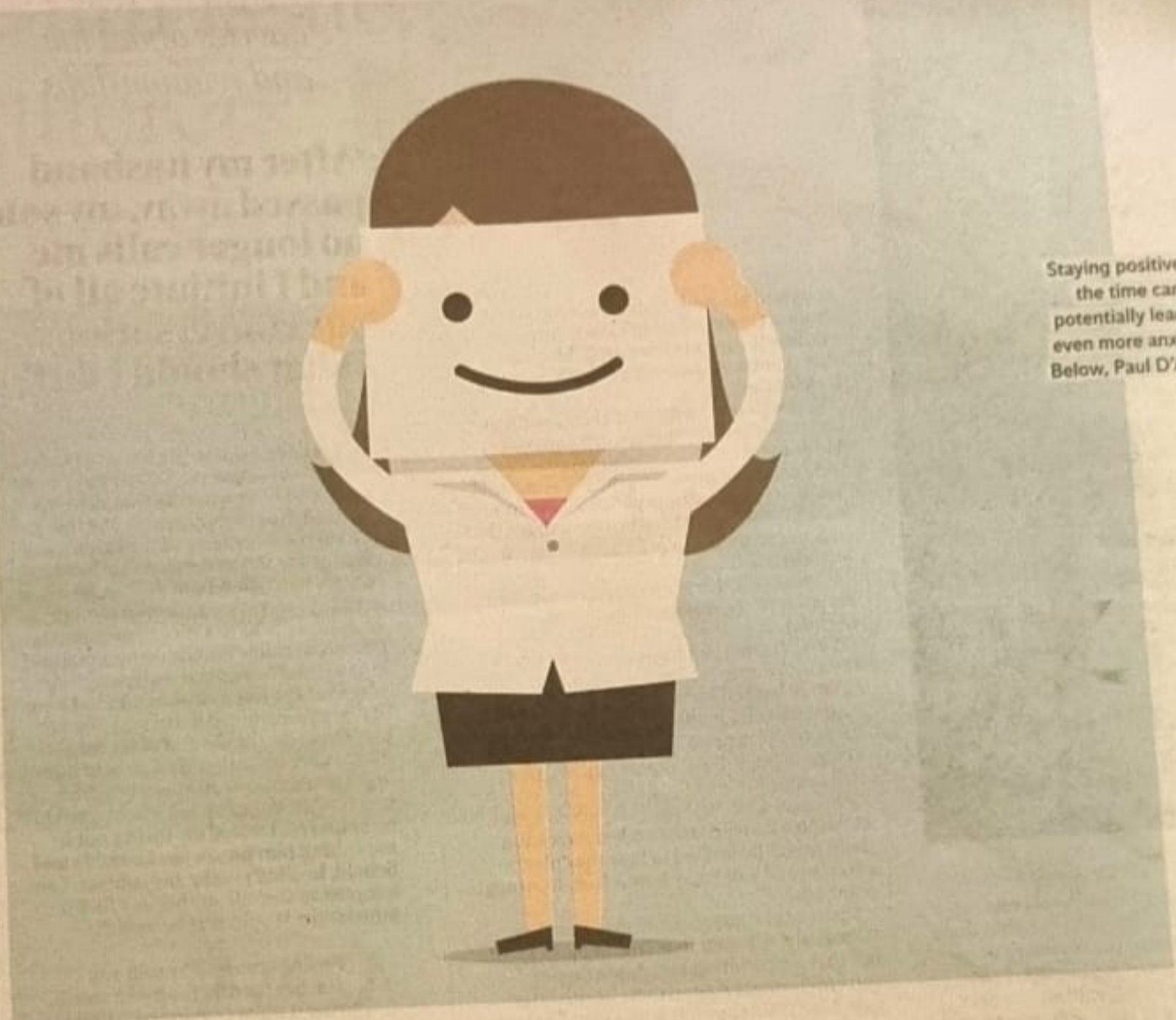
A cancer patient I had seen for therapy a number of years ago came into my office one morning and said, 'I'm nearly hoarse from shouting positive affirmations at myself... and they are not working'.

There is a culture of positivity out there that advocates and promises that if we repeat positive phrases to ourselves like 'I am strong and independent', 'I can beat this', 'I am going to succeed' that we can overcome any difficulty. This kind of approach lacks any scientific evidence and in my clinical opinion is likely to do harm: it will send the nervous system into overdrive; it will obscure our real emotional needs and cause those suffering from cancer to feel unnecessary guilt.

Probably most importantly the 'whatever you do, stay positive' approach can close down the very conversations we most need when life is tough. It closes down the very conversations that keep us alive, the conversations that keep us afloat when things get tough.



'Ditching the excessive emphasis on positivity doesn't mean throwing in the towel'



Staying positive all the time can potentially lead to even more anxiety. Below, Paul D'Alton

Psychologists, and probably a few other healthcare professionals also, have a lot to answer for. Many of us have promoted 'positive thinking' for decades. What the current research says is that we might have got the balance wrong.

It is completely understandable to latch on to something like positive thinking in the face of a serious illness like cancer, especially when it has been promoted by healthcare professionals.

When we are faced with a huge life event like a cancer diagnosis, the rug is pulled from under us. We are forced to confront a reality that has been there all along: this life that we live is utterly unpredictable and uncertain.

And we humans do not do well with uncertainty. We don't like it one little bit. We love certainty, we crave control and find all sorts of ways to fool ourselves into believing we are living in a world governed by certainty. The excessive 'think positive' approach is one way we try to avoid the deeply unsettling reality of our uncertain lives.

Down through the ages, we humans have always attempted to put something in place

to try to protect us from the impermanence and uncertainty at the heart of being a human being.

The power of positivity might be what the 21st century individual latches on to cope with the anxiety of uncertainty. But the excessive 'whatever you do, stay positive' approach causes even further anxiety and heartbreak. Ironically, forced positivity only adds to our suffering.

Ditching the excessive emphasis on positivity doesn't mean throwing in the towel. In fact, the research says that we make better choices and we may actually experience less stress when we drop forced positivity.

It does not mean we don't care; we don't have hope, we don't plan for the future: it is not about being passive.

It is more about facing the facts, accepting the influence you do have and from there making decisions, and importantly, allowing the real conversations that keep us afloat when things are difficult to happen.

Your mind has not caused your cancer, nor will it cure it. We must be very careful not to 'psychologise' cancer by linking it with things

like how we have expressed or repressed emotions over the years, to not being positive enough, or to being stressed for example.

While looking for an emotional or psychological cause for my cancer is an understandable thing to do – we are meaning-making creatures and we don't like uncertainty and crave predictability. The danger with psychologising an illness is we risk blaming the person who has cancer: suggesting that something you have done or not done emotionally or psychologically has caused cancer.

It is about clear thinking rather than positive thinking. With clear thinking we begin to see the world as it is rather than how we want it to be. We practice giving up wanting things to be different from how they are right now – this is the first most important step in living a life with less distress and a little more ease.

Paul D'Alton is head of psychology at St Vincent's University Hospital and associate professor of psychology at UCD. He also wrote *Living with Cancer: Hope amid the Uncertainty*, published by UCD Press