

NO LIGHT without shade

It's time for a backlash against the cult of positive thinking, writes **Nicole Madigan.**

When my husband and I were told our best chance of conceiving a child of our own would be through IVF, because of several medical issues, it was a difficult pill to swallow.

But we embarked on the journey and before long, the advice came flooding in: "If it's meant to be, it will be"; "Stay positive, things will work out for the best"; "Everything happens for a reason." Then there was my personal favourite: "If you relax and enjoy the process, it will happen!"

Okay, I'll relax and enjoy my nightly injections, the bloating and hormonal roller coaster, remembering it's all for the best and if it doesn't result in a pregnancy in the end, well, it wasn't meant to be.

When I was fortunate enough to fall pregnant, I was still suffering the lingering feelings of depression from having gone through IVF in the first place. So the extra pressure of having to be constantly happy because "stress can cause miscarriage" was close to overwhelming.

And don't get me started on the "told you so" reactions when we conceived naturally 10 months after our first son was born. Must have been because we were so relaxed!

It's a situation that's becoming increasingly prevalent in Western society, with the "stay positive" mantra being barked at everyone from pregnant women and the newly separated through to those with life-threatening illnesses and serious injuries. All are told the only way to move forward is to look on the bright side and be happy at all costs.

A generally positive outlook has been linked to longer life and better health, says Lifecare counsellor Susan De Campo. But part of healing is feeling you have permission to express your feelings. "So it can be really tough for people to be given messages about looking on the bright side," De Campo adds.

"For example, when their partner has left them, someone saying, 'Oh, he was an idiot anyway, think yourself lucky', or when they've had a miscarriage, 'Maybe it's nature's way of telling you it wasn't meant to be' – such messages are really unhelpful and can actually impede the person's progress towards healing and acceptance of their circumstances."

Writer and editor J'aimee Brooker, 32, was hit by a car during early pregnancy, leaving her temporarily wheelchair-bound, then learning to walk again while six months pregnant. She found the pressure to stay positive was intense.

"Family and friends pushed me to remain positive, thinking that they were helping me keep on track," says Brooker. "But really it just pushed the uncertain, sad and negative thoughts further inward, where I had to deal with them myself."

"I believe if I'd given up on my positive attitude, I'd have sunk. But you need a balanced approach, and that can only happen if you consider the positives and the negatives."

De Campo suggests an alternative approach to relentless positivity, the Eastern philosophy of mindfulness.

"Mindfulness is about moment-to-moment awareness of present events and not resisting the reality of what 'is' at any given time. It is an attitude of 'it is what it is'. This awareness is thought to lead to an ability to process challenging or unpleasant feelings in an effective and more functional way."

A decade on from her accident, Brooker is still suffering the effects of chronic pain – and continues to feel the pressure to keep smiling. "Sometimes, there isn't a bright side as such, just a brighter-than-bad side," she says.

These days, though, she takes a more balanced approach, occasionally giving herself permission to feel some self-pity.

"It's important to explore how you feel about your situation, understand why you feel that way and allow yourself to grieve the changes in your life," she says. ●

