

Aryan Sajith

Aaron Tillman

ENGLWRIT112

12 December 2022

The Darker Sides of Modern Self Help and What We Can Do About It

00:00:00-00:00:02

[Slow instrumental music plays throughout the video, and captions reflecting the spoken words appear at the bottom of the screen.]

00:00:02-00:00:30

[Images appear: Coronavirus bacteria; person walking into the clouds; wartorn street; gas tank. Label reads “Fig. 0: Images Representing Worldwide Issues”]

Aryan Sajith: In the midst of a worldwide pandemic, the loss of family and loved ones, a bloody and ravaging war in Ukraine and increasingly unaffordable gas prices, the world and people along with it are in an extremely vulnerable position right now. Faced with the challenges of a harsh and difficult reality, many people look towards the self help industry as a beacon of hope,

00:00:30-00:00:50

[A flickering flame. The title appears: “‘Darker Shades of the Modern Self-Help Industry & What We Can Do About It’ By Aryan Sajith. ENGLWRIT 112”]

Sajith: a way to regain control of their lives and improve their current state of affairs. But is the modern self help industry as innocent and optimistic as it may initially seem? Let's take a closer look at some of the ways in which the self help industry falls short and what we can do about it.

00:00:50-00:01:23

[The words “1. A Facade of Toxic Positivity” appear with a light behind it. An arrow points from the words to a cartoon image of someone holding up a mask to a camera. The image is labeled “Fig. 0.1: Fake Smile.” Another arrow appears pointing to an image of an emoji smiley face giving a thumbs up—this label reads: “Fig. 0.2: Positive Emoji.”]

Sajith: First is the establishment of a facade of toxic positivity. Per Cambridge Dictionary, a facade is a false appearance and makes someone or something seem more pleasant or better than they really are. Per Dr. Jamie Zuckerman, a clinical psychologist from Pennsylvania, toxic positivity is the assumption, either by oneself or others, that despite a person’s emotional pain or difficult situation, they should only have a positive mindset. Let's look at some popular positivity quotes that help illustrate this sentiment.

00:01:23-00:02:06

[Each quote is shown with a landscape image]

Sajith: Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, you'll start having positive results.

[Willie Nelson]

Positive thinking will let you do everything better than negative thinking will. [Zig Ziglar]

I have never, ever focused on the negative of things. I always look at the positive. [Sonia

Sotomayor]

The worst times can be the best if you think with positive energy. [Domenico Dolce]

It's not hard to find such messages spread throughout social media, from YouTube to Instagram and beyond. Although intended to uplift and inspire, such messaging serves to glorify positivity in an unhealthy manner and does not effectively convey how to interact with other authentic emotional states. Now we'll look at a study that conveys the harm caused by toxic positivity.

00:02:06-00:03:30

[Graphs appear representing the study spoken about. Label reads: “Fig. 2: Data on Emotional/Physical Response to Emotional Suppression”]

Sajith: We will examine a 1997 study on emotional suppression from UC Berkeley by James Gross, Stanford psychology professor, and Robert LeVinson, a UC Berkeley psychology professor. A black bar indicates emotional suppression and white lack thereof. Participants interacted with three types of content: musing, neutral, and sad. We will focus on the sadness response. Emotional suppression of sadness failed to reduce one's heart rate correlated with statistically significant increases in respiratory activity, i.e. increased breathing and sympathetic activation of the cardiovascular system, i.e. increased stress, sense of danger, and flight or fight response. Based on said data, James suggests that suppression of negative feelings does not, quote, provide relief from the subjective experience of that emotion. Hiding one's emotion is unlikely to help one feel better. Endquote. Thus, the self help industry negatively impacts our mental health by endorsing positivity at the expense of adequately acknowledging other emotions, like sadness. Reasonably enough, people are not always able to quote, unquote, stay happy and keep positive vibes, but they start to question themselves and wonder if there's something wrong with them, whether they aren't good enough, and if they aren't cut out to help themselves. This needs to change. So let's look at some possible solutions.

00:03:30-00:03:37

[The words “1. Possible Solutions” appear with a burning candle]

00:03:37-00:04:09

[Icon of a person speaking with label: “Fig. 3: Express your emotions, even the bad ones”]

Sajith: Firstly, we can express our emotions, even the bad ones. This helps us come to terms with nonpositive emotions and properly acknowledge their impact. As Simone Marie points out, quote, a brain imaging study at UCLA showed that putting feelings into words reduces the intensity of emotions such as sadness, anger, and pain. Endquote. Thus, expressing our emotions is a powerful tool when it comes to handling emotions in lifting the facade of toxic positivity that the self help industry maintains.

00:04:09-00:04:53

[Previous icon is still on the screen. It is joined by a drawing of a person with their brain sticking out and arrows pointing away from their head with caption “be open minded” label: “Fig. 4: Embrace your emotions, even the bad ones”]

Sajith: Secondly, embrace and integrate all emotions, even the bad ones. As Dr. Jamie Long from the psychology group in Florida tells Simone Marie, quote, healthy positivity acknowledges authentic emotions, it rejects the either or mindset that holds that two opposing concepts can be true simultaneously. In other words, you can be sad about losing your job during the pandemic and be hopeful by finding a new job in the future. Endquote. Rejecting the mutually exclusive choice that toxic positivity asks us to make allows us to properly inspect and act upon the broad spectrum of human emotions. Thus, embracing our emotions is a yet another powerful tool that can help combat toxic positivity.

00:04:53-00:05:18

[The word “2. Addiction” appear with a light behind it. An arrow points from the word to a picture of a person’s handcuffed hand typing on a keyboard]

Sajith: Next is the deeply addictive nature of much of the modern self help industry’s content. Per Cambridge Dictionary, once again, an addiction is an inability to stop doing or using

something, especially something harmful. Let's look at some examples of how self help addiction negatively impacted people's lives.

00:05:18-00:06:24

[Images appear of smiley faces with an arrow pointing to a sad stick figure with an arrow pointing to a stack of books with an arrow pointing back to the smiley faces]

Sajith: First we have Susan Johnson, quote, while consuming this content and for a short while after you feel amazing. You plan out a new routine, sign up to the gym and start to get yourself together. You're on top of the world. Then the inevitable happens, two days pass and your motivation wanes. By the third day, the haze evaporates. And your old lazy habits have begun creeping back in. Two weeks on and the experience feels so alien. It feels like a fever dream.

Last few years I have devoured literally thousands of hours of motivational content like self help books, audiobooks, podcasts, YouTube videos, and Instagram posts. I just couldn't get enough and this kind of content got me so fired up that I would actually crave it. Endquote.

Next we have Matthew Kimberton, quote, inside was a battered copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. I had heard about books like this, but had always been hesitant. That all changed in one evening. I'm ashamed to say that I read almost all of it in one sitting. When I was reading this book, and for a few hours after each sitting I felt that I could do anything.

00:06:24-00:07:30

[Previous images of smiley faces, sad stick figure, and book stack are still shown on the left side of the screen. On the right side, the same smiley face image is shown with an arrow pointing to a sad stick figure with an arrow pointing to graphics of balloons/fireworks/gift/wine bottle and a heart, all with a red "X" over them. This then has an arrow pointing to a stack of books which

has an arrow pointing back to the smiley faces. Additionally, the book stacks on each side of the screen have arrows pointing to money bags. Label reads: “Fig. 5.1: Self-Help Addiction Cycle]

Sajith: After the initial rush, though, the novelty started to wear off. After a month of repeated book abuse, I made what I thought was a conscious decision to increase my dose. By this stage I was reading a new book every two days. I had stopped going to parties or leaving my house. I was no longer making love to my wife, despite the 47 books I had read on sex and relationships. And I was doing almost literally nothing but reading. It was costing me thousands and thousands of dollars each month. Self-help was ruining my life. Endquote. These are but a few examples of the millions of vulnerable and impressionable people that were gripped by the addictive nature of self help. I was one of them too. Draws you in with the allure of improving yourself, but then you forget that it isn't just feelgood content that will solve all of your problems. No, it's an industry. A booming and thriving and financially driven industry. Next, let's examine how addiction thrives within the self help industry.

00:07:30-00:08:47

[Image of “Dopamine” and a head with a smiley face in the brain. Labeled: “Fig. 6: Dopamine. Another image appears; this one is a bar graph titled: “U.S. Personal Development Market; the numbers rise each year. The graph is labeled: “Fig. 7: Projected & Tracked Growth of U.S. Self-Help Industry”]

Sajith: As Johnson quotes from Hanzamoto, health science major from Northwest University, quote, when we consume self help content there is a surge of dopamine to our brains and that intense feeling of happiness is unsurprisingly addictive. Endquote. But it only takes a few clicks, watching of a motivational video, reading off a self help book, the purchase of another seminar. It's no wonder that people often addictively consume self help content, even if they don't

necessarily act upon it. This raises an interesting question, however: Would the self help industry still thrive even if the advice that is preached is ineffective? We will answer that question later on. But taking a look at the consistent financial growth of the industry, especially during the peak of a worldwide pandemic that occurred during 2020 clearly illustrates that self help incentivizes the consumption of content in a way that keeps you hooked and always asking for more. Why else especially during 2020, with the pandemic was at its peak, with such economic growth and progress be attainable? With that out of the way, let's look at some ways in which we can approach the challenges posed by self help addiction.

00:08:47-00:08:55

[The words “2. Possible Solutions” appear with a burning candle]

00:08:55-00:10:20

[A cartoon smiling heart wrapping its arms around itself in a hug, labeled: “Fig. 8: Raise Awareness by Establishing and Practicing Self-Acceptance. Another image appears: A picture of someone writing on a wall, labeled: “Fig. 9: Build an Action-Oriented Plan. The third image to appear is an icon of a stethoscope with the words “Also Highly Recommended.”]

Sajith: Firstly, we can raise personal awareness by establishing and practicing self acceptance. As Kendra Cherry writes, reviewed by Rachel Goldman, PhD psychologist, quote, it means that you recognize that you have flaws or weaknesses and you accept them. This doesn't mean that you have given up or aren't interested in building your abilities. Instead, it means that you can focus on goals for getting better without feeling the need to reach some unattainable level of perfection. Endquote. Establishing a baseline level of self acceptance will ensure that you approach self help more realistically in a way that develops your self-confidence and allows you to disengage from the self help industry when necessary. Secondly, we can build an action

oriented plan as Arlin Council writes again reviewed by Rachel Goldman, quote, the healthiest self improvement approaches will give you concrete steps or an action plan for achieving goals. It is not enough to identify goals. Without an action plan to reach those goals, you'll be left languishing. Endquote. So consuming self help content that provides clear road maps and action oriented direction is another way to ensure you don't fall down the rabbit hole of self help addiction. Lastly, I strongly recommend reaching out to doctors and medical professionals in case self help addiction has already taken a strong grip in your life.

00:10:20-00:10:34

[The words "3. Lack of Evidence" appear with a light behind it]

Sajith: Lastly, not all, but most certainly a significant amount of modern self help content lacks evidence. Let's look at some prominent examples that illustrate this point.

00:10:34-00:11:09

[The cover of *The 4-Hour Workweek*]

Sajith: First we have *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join The New Rich*, written by Timothy Ferriss. The book was a number one New York Times bestseller, stayed there for around 5 to 7 years and sold 2.1 million copies worldwide. Clearly, the book influenced many people's perception on work life balance. According to Johnson, however, Tim Ferriss' marketing was actually not accurate. Quote: do you think Tim Ferriss only works 4 hours a week? Of course not. In fact, as reported by Business Insider, he works at least 60 hours a week, and often more. Endquote.

00:11:09-00:12:47

[The cover of *The 4-Hour Workweek* is still shown. The cover of *The Greatest Secret* appears as do the quotes spoken from Byrne's book. Label reads: "Fig. 10: A Collection of Self-Help Books"]

Sajith: Next we have Rhonda Byrne's *The Greatest Secret*, another New York Times bestseller that was published in November 24, 2020, having already sold 35 million copies worldwide. Another monumentally influential book, despite the dubious claims littered throughout it. Billions of people on our planet have searched, but few have discovered the truth. Those few are completely free from negativity and live in permanent peace and happiness. You can live your life utterly free of hurt, upset, worry, and fear, and exist in continuous happiness. All of humanity's suffering comes down to a case of mistaken identity. While these quotes back scientific evidence and make outlandish claims with regard to permanent happiness, another draw a toxic positivity that we tackled earlier, a truth that only this book can reveal another draw at addiction and boiling down all suffering to mistaken identity. Both of these books highlight a recurring theme within the modern self help industry, the ability for people to make outlandish claims that are not supported by science and evidence. This blatant lack of accountability and proof illustrates why you are more valuable to the self help industry as discontent and unsatisfied as opposed to happy and fulfilled. Industry is willing to spread messages and ideas even if they aren't scientifically proven and preserve present absurdly unrealistic claims simply because it will further promote the expansion and financial growth of the industry even at its consumers' own expense. So what can we do about this? Let's take a look at how we can approach the self help industry more cautiously.

00:12:47-00:12:54

[The words "3. Possible Solutions" appear with a burning candle]

00:12:54-00:13:49

[Infographic titled “Main Theory of CBT” includes thoughts, feelings, and behavior; “The main theory behind CBT is that your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors all impact each other.”

Infographic is labeled: “Fig. 11: Be Skeptical and Use Evidence-Based Approaches”]

Sajith: Firstly, we can be skeptical and use evidence-based approaches as Council points out reviewed by Rachel Goldman, PhD psychologist, quote Perhaps most importantly, the healthiest self improvement approaches will be grounded in research evidence. While it may be tempting to follow gurus who promise miracle cures approaches that have been backed by well controlled research trials, are ones most likely to show a benefit. cognitive behavioral therapy CBT techniques are a good example. There is robust research evidence supporting the effectiveness of CBT, so you can use this approach comfortable in the knowledge that has been shown to work. Endquote. By exercising greater skepticism and using evidence-based approaches to self improvement, we increase our odds of success and improve our critical thinking ability, which allows us to effectively engage with the self help industry and weed out lackluster content.

00:13:49-00:14:34

[CBT infographic is still shown. Another image appears of a handshake, labeled: “Fig. 12: Reach Out to Professionals”]

Sajith: Secondly, we can reach out to professionals as Kendra Cherry explains, again reviewed by Rachel Goldman, quote, sometimes talking to a mental health professional can help you keep your self health efforts in perspective. This is particularly important if you're working on using self help to overcome some issues such as anxiety, depression, stress, or another mental health concern. In some cases, you might feel dissatisfied with your self help efforts because you need some other type of treatment in addition to those strategies. Endquote. By reaching out for help

when necessary. You not only break the cycle of self help addiction mentioned earlier, but you also form trustworthy and reliable relationships that can act as healthy support structures in times of difficulty and stress.

00:14:34-00:15:46

[A picture of someone holding a candle. Words read: "Conclusion"]

Sajith: While the desire to improve oneself is admirable and natural, especially in turbulent times such as these, keep in mind that venturing through the modern self help industry is not as innocent and helpful as it may have initially appeared. It is a financially driven industry that maintains a facade of toxic positivity, reeks to the brim with addiction and widely spreads ideas, regardless of their validity. By increasing awareness and laying out some localized steps to addressing these issues, I'm hoping that your experiences and interactions with the modern self help industry will be improved. After all, as Martin Luther King Junior once beautifully remarked, if you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk then Crawl but by all means, keep moving. You don't need to read every self help article, buy every self help book, watch every motivational video, or attend seminars by self help groups. Do what you need to do to achieve your goals in a safe and healthy manner. If you need outside help, make sure to reach out to effective sources with scientifically-backed evidence lest you fall victim to their ruthless operations of an industry based on the sinister business of selling hope.

00:15:46-00:15:54

[Works Cited

Cambridge Dictionary. *Addiction Meaning: 1. An Inability to Stop Doing or Using Something, Especially Something Harmful: 2. An Inability to ...Learn More.* 20 Nov. 2022, dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/addiction.

Cambridge Dictionary. *Lack Meaning: 1. The Fact That Something Is Not Available or That There Is Not Enough of It: 2. To Not Have or...Learn More.* 30 Nov. 2022,

dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/lack.

Cherry, Kendra. "Can You Be Addicted to Self-Help?" *Verywell Mind*, edited by Rachel Goldman, Dotdash Meredith, 17 May 2021,

www.verywellmind.com/can-you-be-addicted-to-self-help-5118241.

Council, Arlin. "The Healthiest Approach to Self Improvement" *Verywell Mind*, 10 Nov 2020,

www.verywellmind.com/the-healthiest-approach-to-self-improvement-4172573.

Cambridge Dictionary. *Facade Meaning: 1. The Front of a Building, Especially a Large or Attractive Building: 2. A False Appearance That...Learn More.* 23 Nov. 2022,

dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/facade.

Johnson, Susan. "Self-help Addiction: The Toxic Forces Driving Modern Industry." *Discover Improve*, 27 Oct. 2020, discoverimprove.com/self-help-addiction.

Kimberley, Matthew. "How I Got Utterly Addicted to Self-Help and How It Ruined My Life." *Medium*, 7 Aug. 2021,

medium.com/@mjkimberley/how-i-got-utterly-addicted-to-self-help-and-how-it-ruined-my-life-69921d7e3141.

Marie, Simone. "'Toxic Positivity' Is Real — and It's a Big Problem During the Pandemic." *Healthline*, 22 July 2020,

www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/toxic-positivity-during-the-pandemic.

A Quote by Martin Luther King Jr., 23 Nov. 2022,

www.goodreads.com/quotes/26963-if-you-can-t-fly-then-run-if-you-can-t-run.]

00:15:54-00:16:00

[Figures & Images]

Slide 2 Background (Burning Candle):

Bhahi. “Fire Flame Candle - Discover and Share GIFs.” *Tenor*, 16 Nov. 2019, tenor.com/view/fire-flame-candle-light-grief-gif-15569222. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Slides 3, 8, 13 Background (Dying Flame):

Pozzi, Barbara. “Extinguish Light My Fire GIF.” *GIPHY*, 3 Apr. 2018, giphy.com/gifs/light-match-flame-5QI9N3dDsNkWsn76KV. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Slides 6, 11, 15 Background (Reignited Match):

Gri. “Burn Match Fire GIF.” *GIFER*, gifer.com/en/gCP. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Fig 1 (Positivity Quotes):

Bliss Quote. “61 Stay POSitive Quotes About Life That Will Inspire You.” Bliss Quote, 29 Jan. 2020, www.blissquote.com/2018/12/inspiring-positive-quotes.html. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Fig 2 (Study on Emotional Suppression):

Gross, James J., and Robert W. Levenson. “Hiding Feelings: The Acute Effects of Inhibiting Negative and Positive Emotion.” *UC Berkeley*, American Psychological Association, 1997, <https://bpl.berkeley.edu/docs/51-Hiding%20Feelings97.pdf>.

Fig 6 (Dopamine Illustration):

Online Psychology Degree Guide. “5 Causes of Dopamine Deficiency.” *Online Psychology Degree Guide*, 20 Aug. 2021, www.onlinepsychologydegree.info/lists/5-causes-of-dopamine-deficiency.

Fig 7 (US Self-Help Market Growth)

Personal Development Market Size Report, 2022-2030. Apr. 2022, www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/personal-development-market.

Fig 10 (Cover of Self-Help Books) -> From www.amazon.com

Fig 11 (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Illustration):

Vogel, Kaitlin. "The Basic Principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy." *PsychCentral*, 6 May 2022, psychcentral.com/pro/the-basic-principles-of-cognitive-behavioral-therapy. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

(Last source is cut off and cannot be read)]

00:16:00-00:16:04

[Audio Credit

Midsommar by Scott Buckley | <https://soundcloud.com/scottbuckley>

Music promoted by <https://www.free-stock-music.com>

Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>]