

Languishing and COVID

More than a year after the outbreak of COVID, many of us can only describe our mental state as something akin to “the blahs.” There’s nothing really wrong, but we’re still not feeling great. There’s a psychological term for this feeling: It’s called languishing.

The Emory University psychologist Corey Keyes, who has long studied languishing, describes it as “emptiness and stagnation, constituting a life of quiet despair” and those who suffer from it as “individuals who describe themselves and life as hollow, empty, a shell, and a void.”

That may be a dramatic description for a case of the blahs. Still, it fits for many of us who are struggling amid a changed world but who also don’t meet the criteria for mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety. We’re not experiencing any critical events, but we’re not experiencing life as fulfilling or even as enjoyable most of the time.

The Mental Health Continuum

To understand languishing, it’s important to see mental health on a scale or a continuum.

- **Flourishing:** A state of positive psychological and social functioning when we are emotionally well-balanced, stable and goal-oriented.
- **Languishing:** An absence of mental health that does not necessarily rise to the level of mental illness; we’re functioning but finding it hard to cope.
- **Mental illness:** A state of distress resulting from severe impairment of psychological or social functioning which is demonstrated in our thoughts, behavior and/or actions.

People can move up and down this continuum throughout their lives. Even people diagnosed with mental illness can flourish with the right help, while those who were once flourishing can languish at times.

The Danger of Languishing

The problem is that people who are languishing can fall through the cracks. Because their level of functioning does not rise to the level of clinical significance, access to support and intervention may be lacking.

Languishing is also a known risk factor for mental illness. In fact, in one study, the risk of a major depressive episode was found to be two times more likely among those languishing than among mentally healthy adults and nearly six times greater among languishing than among flourishing adults.

Languishing has also been associated with lower level of functioning, including absenteeism from work and failure to perform daily activities, such as exercising or completing household chores.

What can we do?

The simple answer is to try to make the move from languishing to flourishing. To do so, it’s important to understand what flourishing looks like and how it’s achieved. Psychological research identifies 6 core components of psychological well-being. These components determine where we fall on the mental health continuum. They are:

1. **Autonomy.** The ability to make your own decisions about how to think and behave, rather than over-relying on others’ opinions or approval.
2. **Competence.** Having knowledge, skills and abilities and using them to solve problems and accomplish worthwhile tasks.
3. **Healthy relationships.** The ability to develop caring, trusting, and supportive relationships, whether you seek many relationships or only a few.
4. **Self-acceptance.** Understanding that, like everyone else, we have our own strengths and weaknesses, and that’s okay.
5. **Personal growth.** Being open to learning and new experiences so that we can continue to mature and develop throughout life.
6. **Purpose in life.** Having a sense of direction, whether that’s being a good parent, a productive professional, a leader in the community or a supportive friend. Purposeful people find satisfaction in setting goals and working to achieve them and feel that their lives have meaning.

While some people are born with a natural sense of purpose, make and keep friends easily and are self-assured, most of us need to work on these aspects of our lives. And, these days, even those who usually feel fulfilled may find themselves languishing amid the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

Short-Term Help

Languishing often goes hand-in-hand with what's called an existential crisis, which is when we question our purpose and goals in life. Given all the alone time we've experienced, it's not surprising that large numbers of people are facing such crises. If you're one of them, it might be helpful to seek professional guidance to discuss your feelings. Contact your Employee Assistance Program if you'd like to speak with a counselor.

There are also some practical actions we can take to try to move ourselves from languishing toward flourishing:

Keeping in Touch

- Video chat with friends and family members you'd normally see in person.
- Set times to talk on the phone or just text when you feel the need to reach out.
- Check whether your email addresses and phone numbers are up to date. If the number or address is right, text/chat for a while. If it isn't, call around and ask if anyone else has the information.

Connect with Others

- Check out your local community website, facebook group or similar online gathering spots to share tips or just to relay stories about how you're spending your time.
- Stay active on social media, but keep in mind, you can get too much of a good thing. Use your online time to distract yourself and to be social not to engage in angry or otherwise negative discussions.

Commit to a Routine

- Plan out your time. Write it down and post it in a prominent place.
- Try to follow your routine. Get up at the same time and go to bed at your usual time.
- As part of your schedule, plan activities to do on different days.
- If your bedtime has been creeping later and later, set an earlier bedtime and plan to get up earlier and exercise, meditate or simply take some time for yourself.
- Remember, during our normally busy lives, most of us would love some more free time. Now is your chance to take advantage of it.

Keep Active

Build physical activity into your daily routine. Even if you don't have home exercise equipment, there's still plenty you can do.

- Vigorous cleaning such as mopping and wiping down windows burns calories
- Have a spontaneous dance party
- Walk or jog up and down stairs
- Check out online exercise workouts
- Stretch, try a few yoga poses or do simple calisthenics like jumping jacks

Seek Out Sunlight, Fresh Air, Nature

Sunlight, fresh air, and nature are vital to mental health and well-being.

- Get as much natural sunlight as you can. Spend time in your yard, if you have one, or sit in an open window or on your doorstep.
- Stroll around your neighborhood, or take a hike in the local park or nature preserve.
- Take up gardening or plan and complete outdoor home improvements such as new landscaping.

Find Ways to be Productive

- Think about tackling that overstuffed closet, crawl space or garage. Box things to donate and others to dispose of.
- Do the same for your digital life. Clear old apps, files, emails and programs from your computer. Upgrade whatever software is out of date and check to make sure all your passwords are up to date.
- We all contract with service providers: grocery deliveries, movie and TV subscriptions, cleaners, etc. Take this time to research alternatives and compare costs.
- Now's the perfect time to review your accounts and get a picture of how close you are to your financial goals.

Hobby Time

Few simple things provide as strong a sense of purpose as hobbies:

- Arts and crafts, such as drawing, painting, collage and sewing
- Home improvement projects or woodworking
- Take up an instrument you've always wanted to learn, or try just singing to the radio
- Start journaling or writing

Keep Your Mind Stimulated

Keep your brain occupied and challenged.

- Read books, magazines and articles. Listen to podcasts, watch films and do puzzles.
- Your local libraries may have apps you can use to borrow eBooks, audiobooks or magazines for free. Choose a topic you've always wanted to know more about.
- There are lots of apps that can help you learn things, such as a foreign language or a new skill.

Overcoming 'Cave Syndrome'

The anxiety many of us feel as we break isolation and try to rejoin the world has been given a name: "Cave Syndrome." While not a medical term, Cave Syndrome is a good description of our fear and unease about leaving our homes as the pandemic, hopefully, winds down.

There's no doubt that Covid-19 remains a threat in many regions. That is especially true in areas where vaccination rates are low. But health officials say fully vaccinated people can and should feel confident in resuming pre-pandemic activities such as visiting loved ones, working in the office or going to school.

The problem is that the long isolation has led to some long-term psychological effects, including stress, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after suffering from trauma. Another factor is that, for many, the fear of getting COVID still seems to outweigh the benefits of returning to a more normal life. They feel safe at home and would rather remain isolated than run the risk of getting sick and dying.

If you're feeling symptoms of Cave Syndrome but want to resume social and work activities, keep the following guidance in mind:

Take it slow. Rank activities from easiest to hardest based on your comfort level. For instance, a walk around the neighborhood would be ranked as easy while going to an amusement park would be hard. Start with the easiest activities and work your way up as your comfort increases.

Ignore peer pressure. Your limits will be different from friends and family. Give yourself permission to decline invitations for activities that put you out of your current comfort zone.

Find alternatives. Want to eat out again but are afraid of crowded restaurants? Choose a place with outside seating and a time before or after the normal lunch and dinner rush, when crowds are smaller.

Be informed and objective about risks. Our risk acceptance has shrunk as our fear has grown. The best way to sort reasonable caution from unreasonable fears is to educate yourself. Use objective resources, such as the CDC or your physician, instead of opinion-based media to sort fact from fiction.

Get help. For many of us, the past 18 months have been long and difficult. Over that time, we've likely developed some unhealthy coping habits and forgotten our normal, health ones. If you're feeling overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee Assistance Program for help.