

From Languishing to Flourishing

NAVIGATING UNCERTAIN TIMES

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In July 2021, an article by organizational psychologist Adam Grant, entitled *“There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing”*, ran in the New York Times and finally put a name to the feeling many of us have experienced over the course of the past 18 months. While languishing is not a new idea, it aptly describes the feeling of apathy, stagnation, and sometimes joylessness a lot of people are experiencing at present due to the circumstances we’ve faced while trying to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the symptoms associated with languishing may not reach the level of severity associated with significant depression or anxiety, it is marked with a reduced sense of well-being and deficit in mental health. As languishing has also been shown to be a risk factor for depression and anxiety, identifying and addressing it is something best done sooner rather than later. With so many factors seemingly outside of our control at the present time, it is reassuring to know that there are many tools and strategies we can begin implementing right now to improve our mental health in our day to day lives.

Positive psychology, which focuses on enhancing overall well-being as opposed to just repairing psychological damage, provides us with a framework of how to start moving away from languishing towards flourishing if we find ourselves feeling less than our best in terms of our mental health. If we take a look at the “Five Pillars of Well-Being”, identified by psychologist Martin Seligman as the building blocks to flourishing and thriving, we can evaluate how fulfilled we are in each domain and identify which areas might benefit from a boost through small, action-oriented steps.

1. Positive Emotion Spend time identifying, acknowledging, and cultivating positive feelings. This can include mindfulness, becoming aware of the beauty in our day-to-day-lives, savoring pleasant sensations, seeking joy, and practicing gratitude. Find times throughout your day to step away from your phone and be fully present, even if its just for a few moments.

2. Engagement Carve out time to engage in activities that cultivate “flow”, a state in which your concentration and skills are directed towards an activity with a clear goal. Examples include playing a musical instrument, reading a book, sports training, painting, focusing on a work task, home

improvement projects, etc. As flow is best achieved during periods of uninterrupted time, make space in your day to focus all of your attention on the identified activity to truly reap the benefits of engagement.

3. Relationships Connecting with others is one of the most reliable ways to improve mood yet it is also one of the aspects of life most impacted by the pandemic. Finding ways to engage with others, primarily those with whom you can enjoy a positive and healthy dynamic, is vital for feeling fulfilled in regards to our need for community and connection. As showing kindness towards others is a sure-fire way to increase well-being, committing to completing one act of kindness each day is a great small step in the direction of enhanced mental health.

4. Meaning Without a sense of purpose, our actions and behaviors may feel aimless and unfulfilling. While it is important to identify what brings meaning to your life, it is also imperative that we allow for shifts in our priorities and purpose as we enter different seasons of our lives. Meaning may be found within the home (taking care of and connecting with family, pets, loved ones, etc.) or on a larger scale (dedicating time and resources to community, religion, politics, social causes, philanthropy, etc.) or a combination of both.

5. Achievement Identifying and achieving goals is vital to gaining a sense of accomplishment. While languishing brings with it a sense of stagnation, achievement reminds us of the progress we are capable of making. These goals can be large or small: learning to play chess, mastering a new song on an instrument, reading two books each month, running a 5k, making the bed each morning, completing a crossword puzzle, etc. If larger goals seem daunting, start small with a few daily tasks that will slowly but surely move you closer to the best version of you.

When there is a deficit in one or more of these domains, our mental health is left off balance in the same way we will wobble if we sit on a stool with one leg that is slightly shorter than the others. While we can typically make-do with the lack of stability, it is far more comfortable when there is a solid foundation beneath us. Languishing may not come with the intensity we associate with significant mental illness, but by taking small daily steps towards enhancing our well-being we are able to move away from feelings of stagnation and towards the experience of flourishing.



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