

# Languishing: What It Means and Why You Might Be Struggling with It

1st May 2022

You may have heard about a phenomenon called languishing—an aimless, joyless state somewhere between depression and flourishing. A *New York Times* article in April 2021 helped start a trend of discussion around languishing, describing it as a “sense of stagnation and emptiness” that many people seemed to be experiencing as part of the “emotional long-haul” of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But is languishing a real health condition? How might it appear in your life, or in the life of a loved one? And if it does, what can you do about it?

## The spectrum of wellbeing

Psychologists think about mental health on a spectrum, from depression to flourishing.

When you're flourishing you feel purposeful, fulfilled, happy, and thriving. It's that state of emotional, mental and physical wellbeing we all hope for.

Depression involves feeling hopeless, worthless, joyless, and without energy. Major depression is a painful and dangerous mental illness.

Languishing falls in between. It's an absence of wellbeing, but without symptoms of mental illness. Put simply, languishing is “the absence of feeling good about your life,” says sociologist Corey Keyes, who coined the term.

## Are you languishing?

A prolonged state of languishing can lead to depression, anxiety, and a higher risk of suicide attempts and premature death. So if you think you or a loved one may be languishing, ask yourself if you're experiencing some or all of the following:

- reduced ability to concentrate
- foggy thinking
- lack of motivation
- reduced enthusiasm about life in general
- loss of interest in activities you normally enjoy
- focusing on avoiding negative things rather than striving for positive ones

© LifeWorks 2020

heartbeat+

# Languishing: What It Means and Why You Might Be Struggling with It

1st May 2022

There's also a quiz from Harvard's Human Flourishing Program that can help you judge whether you're languishing. Take the quiz [here](#). The results of the 'Flourishing Measure', based on research by Professor Tyler J. VanderWeele, can help you to gauge your level of wellbeing based on six domains, including physical and mental health, life satisfaction and purpose, relationships, and financial stability. VanderWeele says "there's no specific score to determine if someone is definitely flourishing, the higher the score, the better." Put simply, you can add up your scores and assess how well you're flourishing or see what area of your life you can focus on improving.

## Steps to take if you feel you're languishing

**Socialise.** If you haven't been seeing friends and family as often as usual, don't let isolation become a habit. Make the effort to socialise, even if it's just small get-togethers or a good conversation with a friend you haven't talked to in a while.

**Get outdoors,** whether it's a hike in the woods, a trip to the beach, an outdoor sport, or just a vigorous walk. The widespread languishing that seems to have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic likely arose partly from spending too much time cooped up indoors.

**Practise mindfulness.** Put aside anxiety about the future and regrets about the past by bringing your attention to the present moment through meditation, yoga, or breathing exercises. Mindfulness has been shown to improve mood and overall satisfaction with life.

**Explore new things and take on new challenges.** Take music lessons or a dance class, learn a new language or skill, and go on small excursions to new places. An active mind will lead to improved wellbeing.

**Do good deeds.** Performing acts of kindness have a powerful effect. Help a friend with a project, donate blood, volunteer.

**Express gratitude.** The flip side of doing good deeds is expressing gratitude for what others have done for you, or for the ways in which you've been fortunate. Studies show that reflecting on what we're grateful for improves our quality of life.

© LifeWorks 2020

heartbeat+

# Languishing: What It Means and Why You Might Be Struggling with It

1st May 2022

The ascent from languishing to flourishing

Languishing isn't new, but it's being talked about more lately. That's partly because there's a newly popular word for it: *languishing*. The fact is, it's always easier to solve a problem when you have a good word to describe it. (The French language already had one: *ennui*.)

Thinking about this poor state of mind as languishing, and using some of the techniques above, can make it easier to understand the condition, accept it as something that happens to a lot of people, talk about it with others, and above all, make it go away! If you are having trouble coping, be sure to reach out to a mental health professional for support.

© LifeWorks 2020

heartbeat+