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# LOST YOUR JOY? YOU COULD HAVE A CASE OF LANGUISHING

"I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't feel like I have a full on depression, but there's nothing that brings me joy either. I'm just going through the motions every day."

Does this sound familiar? Not flourishing, not depressed, but drifting along somewhere in-between? After the shock and trauma of 2020, the long haul effect of the pandemic has caught up with us in the form of something very few had heard of until now – "languishing."

This article will explain what languishing is and why it's happening, then practical ways in which you can shift yourself out of this state.

## WHAT IS LANGUISHING?

The term was first used by sociologist Corey Keyes in 2002, in a paper exploring mental health (flourishing) or its absence (languishing). It was defined as the antithesis of flourishing at that time, which is interesting in that the economic crash of 2008

had not happened yet, let alone a pandemic. Almost twenty years later, the term is an accurate description of the "mood of 2021."

Languishing is not a mental illness as such but rather, a set of distressing emotions that includes joylessness, emptiness, monotony, restlessness and stagnation. If you look and listen around you, it's becoming more apparent that people are feeling restless, apathetic, unsettled. And there's also a tendency to have less interest in life or what used to bring us joy. It's not quite depression but if you have a history of depression and anxiety (or are genetically predisposed) you will tend to be more prone to languishing than others.

Depression and languishing are

not the same entities, however. While they can present similarly there are distinct differences between the two. For example, symptoms of depression include sadness, changes in appetite, feelings of worthlessness, and thoughts of death or suicide. Languishing is more about indifference and a lack of joy or fulfilment.

Languishing is not the same as burnout either. Another feature of languishing is quick bursts of energy and productivity, followed by a feeling of "what's the point" or "why bother" and/or fatigue. This makes it look like burnout, but the difference is that there isn't a progressive exhaustion and demotivation. Rather, there's a constant feeling of joylessness and demotivation, interspersed with

periodic bursts of “recovery” and ensuing activity.

One way to think about languishing is that it's a sort of middle child of mental health – the void between depression and flourishing, an absence of well-being. You don't have symptoms of mental illness, but you're not the picture of mental health either. You're not functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and triples the odds that you'll cut back on work. It appears to be more common than major depression – and in some ways it may be a bigger risk factor for mental illness.

Part of the danger is that when you're languishing, you might not notice the dulling of joy or the dwindling of drive. You don't catch yourself slipping slowly into solitude; you're indifferent to your indifference. When you can't see your own suffering, you don't seek help or even do much to help yourself.

#### HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

Languishing was first documented in the early 2000's, as a term for describing an absence of mental health more than a mental health condition as such. The term did not feature much in mental health circles, until part of the way through 2021 when it started making its way into the media as an attempt to describe the general phenomenon of listlessness, restlessness and joylessness becoming more apparent globally.

As in 2002, there is little known on exactly why languishing happens at all. Part of the reason for this phenomenon could be that we expected 2021 to be better, and different than 2020. After the shock and trauma of 2020, there was quite an expectation on the following year being a return to some sort of normality. However, there was an intense third wave with higher levels of loss – or certainly it felt that way, as we experienced deaths of people known to us, and younger people than before. And there's still a pandemic, we still can't mingle or travel freely, we're still in masks, and despite vaccines being available there are delays (in many countries) in rollout. Even after wading through the overload of information on vaccine efficacy, and deciding whether to go ahead or not (all of which can be exhausting in itself), receiving a vaccine is still no

guarantee against getting COVID or that life is totally normal again. So we're in a holding pattern, a type of limbo, waiting for life to start feeling like we are living again.

#### GAINING CONTROL OVER LANGUISHING

Even if you're not languishing, you probably know people who are. Understanding it better can help you help them.

One of the best strategies for managing emotions is to name them. During 2020, the naming of the collective experience of loss and trauma the world was going through as “grief” was exceedingly helpful. The name gave us a familiar vocabulary to make sense of what had felt like an unfamiliar experience. Although we hadn't faced a pandemic before, most of us had faced loss. It helped us use learnings from our own past losses and how we got through them, to manage the losses we were going through now.

So while we still have a lot to learn about what causes languishing and how to manage it, naming it is a good first step. It can also remind us that we aren't alone: languishing is common and shared. When you add languishing to your lexicon, you start to notice it all around you. It shows up when you feel let down by your short afternoon walk. It's in your kids' voices when you ask how online school went. It's even demonstrated by the “meh” emoji in The Emoji Movie.

#### HOW TO MANAGE LANGUISHING

**Nature:** make time to get out when you can. Change of scenery is very useful in changing state of mind, and can include a physical activity like a walk –which also releases endorphins and boosts your mood.

**Connection:** make time to take breaks from screens and devices, and really connect in a conversation. This includes avoiding work on week-ends or some evenings. Disconnecting from screens will actually give you more energy when you get back to work. You might even start looking forward to it after a break!

**Let some joy in:** allow yourself to actually “enjoy” things again. Instead of focusing on what “should” make you happy or not trying to find it at all, lean into anything that brings you enjoyment. As long as it's not dangerous, it's worth exploring. Find

interests beyond work and/or a screen.

**Separate spaces:** when possible, create a designated space to work in that is separate from where you relax (a different area for being “on” and which you can step out of).

**Support:** if it's an option/available, therapy can be a helpful space and give you tools for navigating new and scary feelings, such as those associated with languishing. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can help people reframe their negative thinking while exploring healthy coping behaviours. When necessary, this may also include taking medication. A therapist can also help you cope with some of the more acute things, like deaths in the family, and managing emotional and mental reactions to the more long-term things (career choices, and pivoting if you've been retrenched, for example). Coaching is also an option here, to upskill yourself for the new workplace and to assist with new issues faced by leaders, such as managing teams remotely and leading within the hybrid workplace.

**Gratitude:** this one has been done to death, but even if you're feeling cynical or apathetic, you are still here with opportunities available to humans – to learn, grow and evolve. Do a list of things you are thankful for physically, emotionally, and spiritually every morning and evening, especially when lonely or sad.

#### A FINAL WORD

Our mental health won't just go back to normal when the pandemic is over, or because we're back in the office or lockdown restrictions are lifted. Recent statistics (SADAG 2021) cite that 1 in 3 South Africans have or will experience a mental health condition, yet there very few professional resources available (1 psychologist per 100 000, 1 psychiatrist per 300 000) and only 5% of the entire Health Budget has been allocated for mental health.

This means we need to assume responsibility for our mental wellbeing as far as possible, and it begins with awareness – of our own state of body and mind, as well as of those around us. There is no need to diagnose or treat, merely to act as an early warning system. Prevention is always preferable to cure.