

Languishing: Mental Health's Neglected Middle Child **Harpriya Singh * and Shruti Shourie****

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought focus on languishing—a condition of poor mental health without clinical depression. This paper examines the concept of languishing, its definitions, theoretical models and possible repercussions if it lies unidentified. The Mental Health Continuum Model, which distinguishes between flourishing, languishing, moderate mental health is where the idea of languishing is located. Studies indicate that depression may precede a state of languishing, underscoring the significance of this. Additionally, studies have linked languishing to positivity ratios (the ratio of happy to negative emotions); a ratio less than 2.9 is associated with a higher risk of languishing. This research paper makes the case for a greater understanding of languishing, especially among young adults. Early detection can stop more serious mental health problems from developing. By knowing the factors that contribute to languishing, educators and mental health specialists may better target their treatments and assist young individuals take the first steps toward flourishing.

Key words: Languishing, Mental Health, Flourishing, Depression

The 21st century has been hailed as a century of stress and it has impacted everyone's life. While the goal of human life is thriving, yet one can witness humanity sinking into Languishing. Post COVID, the concept of Languishing has received a lot of attention. Grant (2021) in an article in New York Times, 'There's a Name for the Blah you are Feeling: It's called Languishing' said that it is that neglected middle child of mental health that can lower your motivation and focus - and it may have been the dominant emotion of 2021, because of COVID pandemic. The present paper aims to understand the concept of languishing and diverse research findings related to the same.

Monroe (2021), President, Newport Institute wrote that since the spring of 2020, mental health of young adults has declined drastically, due to lack of autonomy, college closing and decrease in social interaction. The fear, worry, grief and isolation of the past months have translated into feelings of restlessness, boredom and dissatisfaction, including social anxiety and persisting fears about the virus. This appears to be contributing to high rates of languishing. He further explains that it isn't easy to identify languishing because the signs are not as severe as symptoms of depression or any other mental health disorders.

Jones (2021) says that many of us may have had been experiencing depression due to the pandemic, languishing is an ideal word to describe that stagnant feeling the pandemic brought in many people's lives. Languishing is described as a feeling of emptiness, numbness, feeling stuck, feeling without motivation, no ability to focus, tasks take longer. It had a lot to do to with the uncertainty that the pandemic had created and how it interrupted planning events or creating life goals for the future.

An article published in The Indian Express (March, 2022) stated that if people have been feeling restless, apathetic or even emotionally blunt since the pandemic began, they may be languishing. Languishing is described as an emotional state of

aimlessness and low mood, which can last for a long time.

Lucangeli (2021) reported findings based on research following the pandemic shows that in people, especially the young ones, an increase of suffering, expressed in the form of tiredness and being worried. Depressive and languishing moods seem to be the normal condition for everyone, young as well as adult. A survey was conducted on teenagers (14-18 years) by Save the Children (2021) to investigate the state of "Young people at the time of corona virus." When the participants were asked to report how they were feeling, the most common reported response was "tired".

Since people are blind to the awareness that they are suffering in a state of joylessness, they fail to seek help for same. The request "SOS Gioia Cercasi" which means "SOS Joy Wanted", was put forth to delve deeper into this joylessness and the consequent dilemmas.

Linde (2021) explains that after the shock of 2020, the effect of pandemic has caught up with us in the form of languishing. The term was first used by Corey Keyes in 2002. Twenty years later, the term is a precise description of the —Mood of 2021.

Languishing is relatively a new concept. It is a feeling which was coined in 2002 by sociologist Corey Keyes from Emory University. According to Keyes, "Languishing is defined as a state of emptiness and stagnation, comprising of a life of despair." Those who feel this way lack a feeling of joy and well-being. They are not suffering from symptoms of depression or any other psychiatric condition. They just lack the experience of positive emotions and not and do not function at an optimal level. It affects them psychologically as well as socially. According to Keyes (2002), "Languishers are neither mentally ill nor mentally healthy." Rather a lack of meaning in life. They lack the sense of meaning, purpose and belongingness. This causes them a sense of stagnation, emptiness and lack of emotion. "Languishing is not depression or sadness, but rather 'the absence of

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feeling good about your life’.” (Keyes, 2003). According to APA (2020), “Languishing is the absence of mental health. It’s characterized by dissatisfaction, lack of engagement, and apathy.” Merriam-Webster (2021) defines, “the word- languish, as to be or live in a state of depression or decreased vitality.”

In 2021, Grant emphasizes a spectrum to study broad areas of mental health which expands from depression to flourishing. Grant defined, “Flourishing as the peak of well-being where one has a strong sense of meaning and mastery to others.” and “Depression is the valley of ill-being where one feels drained and worthless.” He further classified that the void between these two is Languishing. Grant opined that, “Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health.” It is an absence of well-being which has no symptoms. It’s a feeling of ‘blah’, a feeling of stagnation and emptiness.

Grant (2021) in a New York time article, has proposed that languishing is “a sense of feeling stuck and empty about one’s life. A feeling of struggling through one’s days, looking at one’s life through a foggy windshield.”

Lucangeli (2021) states that symptoms of languishing may be unique to each person. It may include a sense of feeling stuck or stagnant, a lack of motivation, a sense of mental discomfort or uneasiness or a general lack of wellbeing. This highlighted that mental well-being cannot be inferred, only with absence of psychiatric disorders.

Keyes (2002) opined that “mental health is a combination of emotional, psychological and social well-being.” Flourishing is defined as “a state where individuals combine a high level of subjective well-being with an optimal level of psychological and social well-being.”

Languishing refers to “a state where low levels of subjective well-being are combined with low levels of psychological and social functioning. Those who are neither languishing nor flourishing are considered to have moderate mental health.”

“Languishing is a state that can be more challenging to deal with than mental illness” (Burke, 2006). After understanding how it can go unnoticed in our lives it can be more challenging to deal with than any other mental illness. When people are clinically diagnosed with a mental illness they are at their lowest and seek health services or therapist for help. On the contrary, people in a state of languishing report a sense of being disengaged in everyday activities and unaware of what they want from life. Keyes (2002) said “Languishing is the middle child of mental health – the void between depression and flourishing, an absence of wellbeing.” There are no symptoms of mental illness, neither functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls one’s motivation and disrupts one’s ability to focus.

Theoretical Background

Not many theoretical models have been proposed to explain languishing, because it’s a relatively recent concept. The following models propose the criterion, on which subjects can be identified as flourishing, or languishing or depressed or moderately mentally healthy. These models have been applied and tested across diverse populations, and in different countries.

Mental Health Continuum Model

The Mental Health Continuum Model (MHCM) by Keyes (2002) is a well established theoretical model inspired from positive psychology. It is known as the dual continuum model emphasising on three states of mental health (1-3) and three states of mental illness (4-6). According to Keyes (2005), the MHCM framework includes, “(1) Flourishing (high mental health with low mental illness); (2) Pure languishing (low mental health and low mental illness); (3) Moderate mental health (average mental health with low mental illness); (4) Flourishing and mental illness; (5) Moderate mental health and mental illness, and (6) Languishing along with mental illness.”

As per Keyes model, the three states of mental health can exist independently that is flourishing, languishing and moderate mental health. They can also co-exist with mental symptoms of illness. Rarely it is also seen that flourishing individuals can simultaneously have symptoms of mental illness such as anxiety or stress.

Keyes and Lopez (2002) identified the “state of mental health or illness by distinguishing between a four-fold typology model including flourishing, languishing, floundering and struggling.” This model suggests people to move from states of languishing, struggling or floundering which are associated with poorer states of functioning to a state of flourishing in life. All these states are not a permanent condition. “Individuals can move along the continuum” (Keyes & Lopez, 2002). Theoretically, “individuals could move from languishing to flourishing or vice versa” (Keyes, 2005). Regarding this theory of mental health continuum, Keyes (2007) explains that “an individual can move from languishing to flourishing and from flourishing to languishing according to their personal and social conditions they experience.”

Broaden and Build Theory

In 1998, Barbara Fredrikson gave the broaden and build theory of positive emotions. According to this theory, positive emotions broaden people’s temporary thought and action repertoires, supplementing their array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind. For example, the feeling of joy creates an innate urge to be creative. Interest makes an individual explore the world and seek out new experiences. Contentment on the other contrary, creates a sense of peace within the individual to relax and savour the life. Love is a positive emotion which is experienced within a safe, close relationship. It creates a circle of play, joy, exploration and valuing your loved ones. This is how positive emotions broaden our thoughts and actions.

According to the broaden and build theory of positive emotions, “positive emotions could enhance one’s health and quality of life” (Fredrickson, 2005). “Individuals who experience higher number of positive emotions (love, joy, contentment and gratitude) are generally more adjusting to stressful life experiences” (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), “they demonstrate greater resilience” (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009), “reduced risks of morbidity” (Fredrickson & Levenson 1998) and “are more likely to flourish in life” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). In comparison to “those people who experience lesser positive emotions and more negative emotions (fear, shame, sadness and anger) tend to be less satisfied with life and more likely to develop physical and psychological illnesses” (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles & Glaser, 2002)

Researchers have discovered that “the proportion of one’s experienced positive and negative emotions, which is referred to as positivity ratio, has a predictive ability in differentiating between individuals who flourish or those who languish in life.” Fredrickson and Losada (2005) found that “a positivity ratio of 2.9 served as a reliable cutoff score between flourishing and languishing individuals.” Individuals who reported positivity ratios greater than 2.9 were classified as flourishing (they were satisfied with life and experienced fulfilment and were resilient). Those with a “positivity ratio above 2.9 was considered —the good life” (Fredrickson, 2009). Individuals whose positivity ratios were at or below 2.9 were languishing in life. They described life as unsatisfactory and stagnating. They were weighed down by feelings of being ‘stuck in a rut’ and feeling as if life was better for others. “Positivity ratio, the ratio of positive to negative affect, was conceptualized as a key predictor of well-being and flourishing” (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005). Moreover, research suggests that “the critical value of the positivity ratio distinguishing between flourishing and languishing individuals is 2.9:1” (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005).

Keyes and Haidt (2003) defined languishing as “a state in which people have no positive emotion towards life, not functioning well psychologically or socially, and are neither fulfilling their potential nor realizing their goals and aspirations.”

Keyes (2003) found that there were many people who were not depressed but who were not even thriving either. After expansive research, it was found that people who are languishing are more likely to experience major depression and anxiety disorders in the years to come. Risk of a major depressive episode was twice more likely among individuals languishing than adults who were moderate on mental health and it was also seen that the risk was nearly six times higher among adults who were languishing than those who were flourishing.

Keyes (2005) studied a sample of 3032 adults of a age group of 25-74 years, that mental health was seen as a protective factor against chronic physical conditions whereas mental illness seen as a risk factor with age. These conditions increased rapidly with age among languishing adults and adults with languishing and major depressive episode.

McKee, Algoe, Faro, O’Leary and O’Neal (2019) created an innovative, technology-based intervention called – ‘Picture This! Bringing Joy into Focus and Developing Healthy Habits of Mind.’ Based on review, it was seen that daily experiencing awe, joy, curiosity, gratitude and love can move an individual on a path of growth and success in positive social interactions. Findings also showed that only 20% were flourishing and most people languishing were not functioning at an optimal capacity of well-being. Singh, Bassi, Junnarkar and Negri (2015) aimed at finding the prevalence of mental health and its associations with mental distress and psychological functioning of 539 Indian adolescents (13-18 years) in New Delhi. Findings showed 46.4% adolescents were flourishing, 51.2% were moderately mentally healthy and 2.4% adolescents were languishing.

Gloria and Steinhardt (2013) conducted a survey on 200 post-doctoral fellows to determine if the positivity ratio (flourishing, languishing and depression) showed any differences in their perceived stress, trait anxiety and depressive symptoms. Data disclosed significant differences among flourishing, languishing and depressed samples. Flourishing post-doctoral students (whose positivity ratio at or above 2.9) had low levels of stress, trait anxiety and depressive symptoms. The Languishing group (with positivity ratio between 1.0 - 2.9) experienced higher levels of stress, but the post-docs in depressed category (positivity ratio less than 1.0) showed highest levels of the variables studied. Data revealed that 13% of post-docs were flourishing, 58% languishing and 29% depressed.

Rationale of this study

As discussed, Languishing is the neglected middle child of mental health (Grant 2021). The focus of research in psychology has either been on Flourishing or Depression, effects of Languishing need to be researched. It is the need of the hour to become aware of this state and be responsible for our own wellbeing. Languishing is a void between flourishing and depression. The risk of Languishing is high because there’s an absence of clinical symptoms and mental illness. We may become oblivious of the dulling of joy in our life, lack of drive or motivation. Since we can’t see our sufferings, we don’t seek help or do anything to help ourselves (Linde, 2021).

People who report loss of joy, though they do not qualify to be diagnosed with depression. Languishing is defined as, “a state in which an individual is devoid of positive emotion toward life, and is not functioning well either psychologically or socially, and has not been depressed during the past year” (Keyes 2001).

We cannot afford to ignore most of the youth who are neither clinically ill, nor flourishing in their lives. The fluid compartmentalization on one hand can increase the vulnerabilities of youth to end up into a clinical disorder, but on the positive side, one can cross over to move towards flourishing in life. Hence, its need of the hour, to identify the ones in between to avoid future vulnerability towards psychopathology. Understanding languishing and its correlates can help the educators and mental health workers to highlight in their interventions, the facilitative strategies that can alleviate languishing and help the young adults to sail thru the empty and directionless phase of their lives. It is essential to study Languishing to avoid seeking clinical help later in life for more serious clinical disorders like depression. The youth are the future of a country. If we identify the languishing youth today and take right reforms, we can help the youth to move from a state of languishing to flourishing.

The findings from the current paper can enlighten the mental workers to devise workable modules based on the main areas, which can be the possible pathways to deal with languishing among young adults by providing them with effective skills to thrive in their lives and to counter languishing. At the threshold of adult roles in their personal and professional lives, the languishing young adults may feel handicapped to meet the challenges of life. By outlining the risk and protective factors related to languishing, we can aim to prepare the young adults with an effective tool to deal with languishing and move forward with engagement, purpose and meaning in life.

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