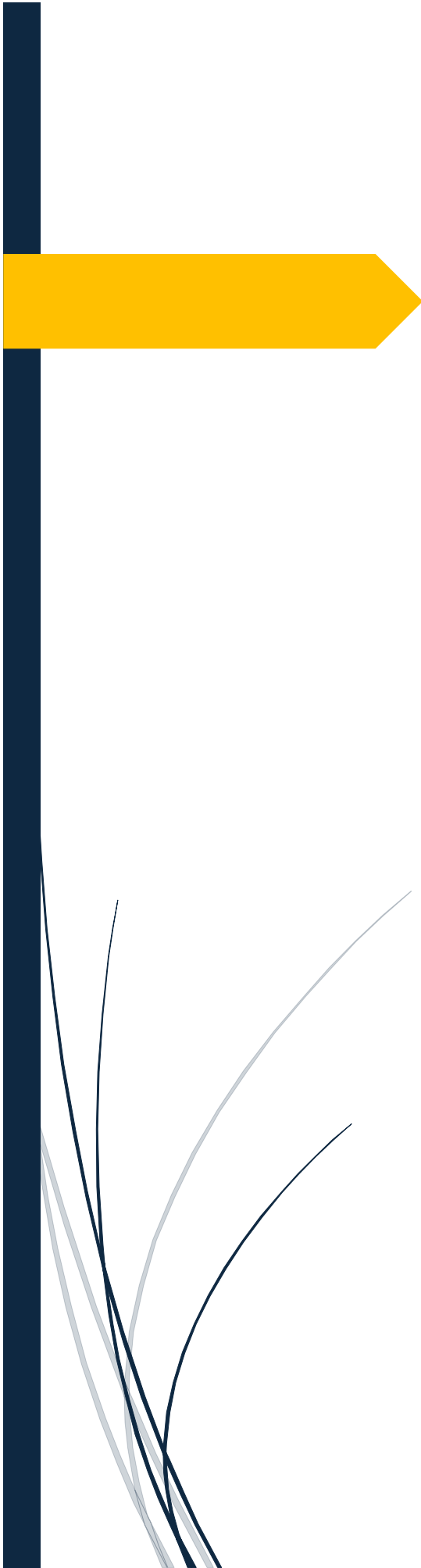




# Languishing

When Life Feels Flat

**Tracy Henderson**  
**Counseling**

Sometimes our emotional experience is easier to recognize at the ends of the spectrum.

We know when we're **feeling good**. We may feel engaged, connected, interested, motivated, hopeful, curious, energized, or excited about something in our lives.

We may also recognize when we're **struggling significantly**. Depression, for example, can involve persistent low mood, loss of interest or pleasure, changes in energy, sleep, appetite, concentration, motivation, hope, and our ability to function.

But there can be another experience that is harder to describe.

### **Languishing**

You may not feel particularly depressed. But you don't really feel **good**, either.

You may still be functioning. Going to work. Taking care of responsibilities. Parenting. Maintaining relationships. Exercising. Getting through your day.

Yet something feels...

- **Flat.**
- **Stagnant.**
- **Disconnected.**
- **Uninteresting.**
- **Repetitive.**
- **Empty.**
- **Blah.**

You might describe it as:

- “I'm fine. I'm just not really excited about anything.”
- “Nothing is wrong, but something feels missing.”
- “I'm just going through the motions.”
- “Every day feels the same.”
- “I don't really have anything I'm looking forward to.”
- “I don't feel like myself.”

This experience is sometimes described as **languishing**.

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## The Space Between Feeling Good and Depression

One way to think about our emotional experience is as a spectrum:

**FEELING GOOD ←—— LANGUISHING ———→ STRUGGLING / DEPRESSION**

Languishing can describe a unique space where we may **not be experiencing significant symptoms of depression, yet we're also not experiencing much vitality, engagement, meaning, connection, or momentum.**

These aren't rigid categories. People can move between them, experience characteristics of more than one, or feel differently across different parts of life.

The spectrum is simply a way to become curious about **where you are right now.**

**FEELING GOOD = “I'm participating in my life.”**

You may notice:

- Connection
- Interest
- Curiosity
- Purpose
- Energy
- Play
- Growth
- Accomplishment
- Anticipation
- Meaning

**LANGUISHING = “I'm functioning in my life.”**

You may notice:

- Flatness
- Stagnation
- Routine
- Disconnection
- Low enthusiasm
- Reduced curiosity
- Limited anticipation
- Going through the motions
- A sense that something is missing

**DEPRESSION = “I'm struggling to participate in my life.”**

You may notice:

- Persistent sadness or emptiness
- Significant loss of interest or pleasure
- Low energy
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hopelessness
- Withdrawal
- Difficulty functioning

Languishing isn't simply a milder version of depression. There can be overlap, and persistent or significant symptoms may warrant further exploration.

Instead, **languishing can help describe the experience of functioning without really flourishing.**

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## Functioning Isn't Necessarily Flourishing

We often evaluate how we're doing by asking: **Am I getting everything done?**

But functioning tells us only part of the story.

You might be:

- Going to work.
- Getting the kids to school.
- Paying the bills.
- Making dinner.
- Exercising.
- Completing responsibilities.
- Maintaining relationships.
- Doing everything you're “supposed” to do.

And still wonder: **“Is this it?”**

Nothing necessarily needs to be dramatically wrong for something important to be **missing**.

Sometimes our lives gradually become organized around:

- **Responsibility.**
- **Routine.**
- **Productivity.**
- **Obligation.**
- **Taking care of others.**
- **Getting through the week.**

We may become very effective at **maintaining life** while becoming increasingly disconnected from the experiences that help us **feel alive within it**.

Instead of immediately asking: “What's wrong with me?”

try asking: **“What might be missing from my life right now?”**

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## How Does Life Get Smaller?

Languishing doesn't necessarily arrive all at once.

- Life can gradually narrow.
- Work becomes busier.
- Children need more attention.
- Relationships become more logistical.
- Friends become harder to see.
- Hobbies disappear.
- Exercise becomes inconsistent.
- Travel decreases.
- Responsibilities increase.
- Stress accumulates.
- Novelty decreases.
- We stop trying new things.

The things we once enjoyed become harder to fit into the calendar. Eventually, life can become very efficient but not particularly nourishing.

### Consider:

- What did I used to do that I don't do anymore?
- Who did I spend time with?
- What did I look forward to?
- What challenged me?
- What made me curious?
- Where did I experience play?
- What gave me a sense of accomplishment?
- When did I feel most like myself?
- What gradually disappeared?
- What has taken its place?

Then ask: **When did my life start getting smaller?**

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## Find Your Disconnects

Rather than trying to immediately “**feel better,**” look for where something may have become disconnected or scarce. Use **ME | WE | US | LIFE** as a way to explore.

### **ME: My Relationship With Myself**

Have I become disconnected from:

- My identity?
- My interests?
- My capabilities?
- My values?
- My creativity?
- My independence?
- My sexuality?
- My physical body?

- My sense of competence?
- My curiosity?
- My sense of purpose?
- My goals?

Ask: **What parts of ME haven't had much room lately?**

### **WE: My Relationships with Others**

Have I become disconnected from:

- Friends?
- Family?
- Community?
- Meaningful conversation?
- Being known?
- Feeling understood?
- Supporting others?
- Receiving support?
- Belonging?
- Shared interests?

Ask: **Who helps me feel more like myself?**

And: **Who haven't I seen enough?**

### **US: My Shared Relationships**

Sometimes relationships remain intact but become primarily about **managing life**.

Have we become disconnected from:

- Play?
- Affection?
- Intimacy?
- Curiosity?
- Novelty?
- Shared experiences?
- Dating?
- Humor?
- Conversation that isn't about logistics?
- Time together without an agenda?

Ask: **Are we sharing a life or mostly managing one?**

### **LIFE: The Environment Around Me**

Sometimes languishing isn't just about us. Look at the system around you.

Work.

- Parenting.
- Caregiving.
- Finances.
- Health.
- Housing.
- School.
- Responsibilities.
- Transitions.
- Schedules.
- Stress.
- Technology.
- Sleep.
- Routine.

Ask: **What has LIFE been requiring from me lately?**

Then: **What has that left less room for?**

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## What Has Become Scarce?

Sometimes we don't need to identify what is “wrong.” We need to identify what has become **scarce**.

Circle or notice what feels limited right now:

- |              |                  |                |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|
| • Connection | • Creativity     | • Friendship   |
| • Purpose    | • Belonging      | • Curiosity    |
| • Play       | • Accomplishment | • Adventure    |
| • Novelty    | • Rest           | • Contribution |
| • Challenge  | • Autonomy       | • Anticipation |
| • Growth     | • Affection      | • Fun          |
| • Movement   | • Intimacy       | • Meaning      |

**Something Else:** \_\_\_\_\_

Now ask: **Which one or two of these would make the biggest difference if I had a little more of them?**

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## Don't Wait to Feel Like It

One of the traps of languishing can sound like: “I'll do something when I feel more motivated.”

But motivation doesn't always come first.

Sometimes: **ACTION → EXPERIENCE → INFORMATION → MOTIVATION**

You don't have to know whether you'll enjoy something before trying it. Instead, treat change as an **experiment**.

Rather than: “I need to become more social.”

- Try: **“I'm going to text one friend and see what happens.”**

Rather than: “I need a hobby.”

- Try: **“I'm going to spend 30 minutes doing something I used to enjoy.”**

Rather than: “We need more intimacy.”

- Try: **“We're going to spend an hour together without talking about logistics.”**

Rather than: “I need to find my purpose.”

- Try: **“I'm going to do one thing this week that feels useful or meaningful.”**

The goal isn't to redesign your entire life.

The goal is to create **small opportunities for your life to respond differently.**

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## **DO Therapy: Put Something Back**

Choose one thing that has become scarce.

- **What is missing?**
- **When did I last experience more of it?**
- **What was I doing?**
- **Who was involved?**
- **What has gotten in the way?**

Now ask: **What is the smallest version of this I could put back into my life?**

Not the ideal version. Not the permanent solution. The **smallest useful experiment.**

**This week I will: .....**

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## **DO Therapy: Create Something to Look Forward To**

Languishing can make life feel repetitive: **Wake → Work → Responsibilities → Screen → Sleep → Repeat**

Sometimes what is missing isn't pleasure right now. It's **anticipation.**

Ask:

- **What am I looking forward to today?**
- **This week?**
- **This month?**

If your answer is: “Nothing really.”

Don't judge it. Use it as information. **Create something.**

- |                        |                                |                   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| • Coffee with someone. | • Golf.                        | • A concert.      |
| • A hike.              | • Cooking something different. | • A workout goal. |
| • A movie.             | • A class.                     | • A weekend away. |
| • A new restaurant.    | • A date.                      | • A book.         |
| • A project.           |                                | • A game.         |

Something small can still give the future **texture**.

Ask: **What could I put on the calendar that I would genuinely look forward to?**

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## **DO Therapy: Break the Pattern**

Sometimes the issue isn't that our routines are bad. They have simply become **too predictable**. There is an absence of **novelty**.

Try deliberately introducing something different.

- Take another route.
- Eat somewhere new.
- Move your body differently.
- Call someone you haven't talked with recently.
- Try a new recipe.
- Work somewhere different.
- Listen to different music.
- Learn something unrelated to work.
- Spend time outside.
- Try something you're not good at.
- Say yes to something you normally decline.
- Initiate rather than wait.

**Then notice:** Did anything shift?

Not: "Did this completely fix how I feel?"

Instead:

- Did I feel 5% more interested?
- Did time move differently?
- Did I feel curious?
- Did I laugh?
- Did I feel connected?
- Did I feel competent?
- Did I think about something different?
- Did I feel more like myself?

Small shifts are still information.

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## DO Therapy: Follow the Energy

When we're languishing, asking: "What makes me happy?" can feel like a surprisingly difficult question.

Try something smaller. **Notice what gives you even a little energy.**

After an activity or experience, ask:

- **MORE — Did this give me something?**
- **NEUTRAL — Did I feel about the same?**
- **LESS — Did this leave me more depleted or disconnected?**

Don't immediately reorganize your life. Collect information. Over time, look for patterns.

- What gives me energy?
- What creates interest?
- Who brings something out of me?
- Where do I feel competent?
- What makes time move quickly?
- What leaves me feeling more connected?
- What consistently drains me?

Then ask: **How can I create a little more of what gives and a little less of what only takes?**

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## Test to Learn: Experiment

You don't need to solve your entire life.

Choose **one experiment**.

- **Something that has become scarce:**
- **Something I used to enjoy:**
- **Someone I feel connected to:**
- **Something I'm curious about:**
- **Something that would challenge me:**
- **Something I could look forward to:**
- **Something I could do differently:**

Now choose one.

**My experiment this week:**

Afterward, ask:

- **What did I notice?**
  - **Did anything shift?**
  - **What should I try again, change, or add next?**
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## **You Don't Need to Feel Bad Enough**

Sometimes people minimize languishing because life looks okay.

- “Other people have bigger problems.”
- “I have nothing to complain about.”
- “My life is actually pretty good.”
- “I should be happy.”

Those things can be true while something is still missing. You don't have to be in crisis to become curious about your life. And you don't need to wait until you're struggling significantly before doing something different.

Perhaps the question isn't: **“Am I doing badly enough that something needs to change?”**

- Try: **“Is there something I would like more of in my life?”**
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## **From Functioning Toward Flourishing**

The goal isn't to feel amazing every day. Life includes boredom, responsibility, stress, grief, fatigue, routine, and difficult seasons. But if you notice yourself spending more and more time **going through the motions**, get curious.

- **NOTICE:** Where do I feel flat, disconnected, or stagnant?
- **FIND THE DISCONNECT:** What has become absent or scarce?
- **ADD SOMETHING BACK:** What is one small experience I can create?
- **TEST & LEARN:** What happened when I did?
- **REPEAT:** What do I want a little more or a little less of next?

The shift doesn't have to be: **Languishing → Feeling Amazing**

It can begin with: **Languishing → Curiosity → Small Action → New Experience → More Information → Another Choice**

Sometimes we don't need to completely change our lives.

We need to start **participating in them again**.