

Languishing from the Ongoing Impacts of COVID19

When COVID-19 upended society nearly 2 years ago, it also threatened our lives and those of our loved ones. Many people have found ways to adjust to the changes, but unrelenting isolation, fear and dread have propelled many of us into a languishing state. As scientists and physicians work to treat and cure the physical symptoms of long-haul COVID, many people are struggling with the emotional long-haul of the pandemic. It hit some of us unprepared as the intense fear of the last 2 years has repeatedly ebbed and faded. It has left some of us languishing and unable to find our way out of the tunnel and into the light again.

So, What is Languishing?

The term was coined by a sociologist named Corey Keyes, who was struck that many people who weren't depressed also weren't thriving. His research, published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2010, suggests that the people most likely to experience major depression and anxiety disorders in the next decade aren't the ones with those symptoms today. They're the people who are languishing right now.

In lay terms, "Languishing" describes low mental well-being in the absence of a diagnosable mental health condition. Languishing has been called the neglected middle child of mental health. It's the void between depression and flourishing — the 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. In order to go from languishing to flourishing, we need to acknowledge the causes and to heal and grow through them.

When I first prepared this presentation for another group last summer, it was not with a Biblical or spiritual focus. Further reading and research have convinced me that languishing is indeed Biblical and spiritual and that we can look to scripture for a way through to flourishing. There are 15 references to languishing in various translations of the Old Testament; five appear in the King James Version. In fact, the King James Version Dictionary defines languish as:

1. To lose strength or animation; to be or become dull, feeble or spiritless; to pine; to be or to grow heavy. We languish under disease or after excessive exertion.
2. To wither; to fade; to lose the vegetating power.
3. To grow dull; to be no longer active and vigorous. The war languished for want of supplies. Commerce, agriculture, manufactures languish, not for want of money, but for want of good markets.
4. To pine or sink under sorrow or any continued passion; as, a woman languishes for the loss of her lover.
5. To look with softness or tenderness, as with the head reclined and a peculiar cast of the eye.

Does any of that sound familiar? To lose animation, to grow dull, spiritless?

As Sam Chan, a theologian, preacher, author, evangelist, ethicist, cultural analyst and medical doctor says "*Languishing* describes how we feel in the COVID-19 isolation lockdown: Not flourishing. Not bored. But languishing.

He goes on to say "But why do we feel this way? I can't imagine a dog, or a goldfish, or a virus particle feeling this way. So why do we humans feel it? Because *languishing* is our soul's way of saying: "There must be *more* to life than just this!"

"It's our human intuition telling us that we must be more than just atoms and molecules. Things don't just happen without a reason. Instead, this universe has a purpose and direction, but right now we're not feeling it. Because it feels like we're going nowhere. We're only circling the block, over and over again.

"Maybe, languishing is also God's way of saying that our intuitions are correct. This universe does have a story for us – and it's called the *God's story*, i.e., the gospel. All stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Languishing tells us that right now, we're only in the middle of the story. Not the end.

He ends by saying "Languishing also tells us that we better take our part in God's story. Otherwise, we risk being stuck in the middle of no story at all – where we end up languishing *forever* without God and His story for us."

How Do We Know We are Languishing?

Are you feeling "somewhat joyless and aimless"? It isn't surprising that many of us would feel this way after the enormous trauma and upheaval of the pandemic. Many people are struggling with the emotional long-haul of the pandemic. Not surprisingly, at least for some, the acute state of anguish has given way to a chronic condition of languishing. Many of us are also dealing with the myriad of losses and grief-causing events that occurred – loss of loved ones, health, independence, "normalcy", even the on-again, off-again ability to participate in seemingly simple acts such as public worship, eating out, giving hugs... the list goes on and on.

Psalm 88 is one of those psalms that deal with the terrifying idea of the "**absence of God**" in our lives — moments when he simply does not seem to be around or care. It is a lament — a **wailing**. The International Standard Version of verse 9 says 'My eyes languish (mourneth in the King James Version) on account of my affliction; all day long I call out to you, Lord, I spread out my hands to you."

Part of the danger is that when we're languishing, we might not notice the dulling of delight or the dwindling of drive. We don't catch ourselves slipping slowly into solitude; we're indifferent to our indifference. When we can't see our own suffering, we don't seek help or even do much to help ourselves. I think about mornings I've spent an extra hour or more in bed, or maybe, like me, you have abandoned a hobby or project, or what about the times you've felt indifferent about your prospect of post-pandemic travel, family functions, volunteering or sharing your talents. Languishing sneaks up on us — it's

coasting, but without the easy breezy attitude. It thrives when we lose our focus and then lose the *will* to regain our focus.

Once we understand what languishing is, we can acknowledge its impact on our lives, learn coping skills and find and use supportive tools which will help us to move to flourishing. When I had a name for how I was feeling, thanks in large part to a New York Times article by Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at Wharton, I realized I was not alone in my feelings, that there was a reason for my inertia and loss of interest in many activities I usually find pleasurable, and that the light at the end of the tunnel was not necessarily an on-coming train!

One of the best strategies for managing our low well-being is to name it and accept that is it languishing. 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 spouse's voice when you ask how their day went. It's in "The Simpsons" every time a character says, "Meh."

Healthy or "good" languishing, like good grief is accepting it as the present; working through (experiencing) the blahs associated with it; adjusting to an environment in which much of what was important is missing; and finding an enduring connection to the past while embarking on a new life. Although we anticipate a return to normal, it may be a "new" normal requiring a redefinition of ourselves, which is part of life and a necessary part of any recovery process.

Tips to Prepare for Your Journey to go from Languishing to Flourishing

- ✓ Pack lightly. Languishing can be a heavy burden. You don't need to face everything all at once. Put down your excess baggage; it will be there to pick up when you are able to do so.
- ✓ Bring along a companion. A supportive listener, a trusted friend, a clergyperson, a support group, or a counselor can give you perspective about your journey.
- ✓ Know there will be some bumps and detours along the way. No journey is ever completely smooth, even though it may start out that way. Expect some rough times.
- ✓ Find a navigator to guide you. By reading articles on languishing, by consulting with others who have been or are going through it, or by getting support from a counselor, you will find the road less treacherous.
- ✓ Bring along extra provisions. Taking care of yourself with good nutrition, plenty of rest and other self-care practices will make your journey more bearable.
- ✓ Pause at rest stops along the way. If you have a support system of friends, relatives, or neighbors, now is the time to seek them out and open yourself up to their support.
- ✓ Bring an umbrella. Storms are inevitable. Your personal resources, including your religious or spiritual beliefs can serve as your umbrella.

Although the following poem by Andy Raine is about grief, I think it also pertains to languishing.

DO NOT HURRY

Do not hurry as you walk with grief. It does not help the journey.
Walk slowly, pausing often.
Do not hurry as you walk with grief,
Be not disturbed by memories that come unbidden.
Swiftly forgive; and let Christ speak for you unspoken words.
Unfinished conversation will be resolved in him.
Be not disturbed.
Be gentle with the one who walks with grief,
If it is you, be gentle with yourself.
Swiftly forgive, walk slowly, pausing often.
Take time, be gentle as you walk with grief.

What are some coping skills and supportive tools for difficult times and what does the Bible have to say about them?

One strategy that may be an antidote to languishing is a concept called “flow”. Flow is that state of absorption in a meaningful challenge where your sense of time, place, and self melt away. During the early days of the pandemic, the best predictor of well-being wasn’t optimism or mindfulness — it was flow. People who became more immersed in their projects managed to avoid languishing and maintained their pre-pandemic happiness.

My “flow” is mornings spent working my way up the levels of several games on my tablet. What would send you into “flow” – conquering an early-morning word game, binging on a Netflix series, pondering the meaning of Bible readings or daily devotionals, getting into a good book? Think of what you can do to transport yourself.

Philippians 4:13 says “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” Knowing that HE ‘has our back” often gives us the reassurance we need to get through the day, and the night.

Another strategy is to focus on small challenges. The pandemic was a big loss. To transcend languishing, try starting with small wins, like the tiny triumph of figuring out a whodunit or the rush of playing a seven-letter word in Scrabble. Find a challenge that stretches your skills and heightens your resolve. That means carving out daily time to focus on something that matters to you — an interesting project, a worthwhile activity, a meaningful conversation. Sometimes it’s a small step toward rediscovering some of the energy and enthusiasm that you’ve missed during all these months.

2 Corinthians 2:14 says “Now thanks be unto God, which always causes us to triumph in Christ, and makes manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.”

You can also focus on people by cultivating relationships. Good relationships keep us happier and healthier, period. They are the most powerful factor in our well-being. Whatever your current circumstances, pick a relationship that’s important to you. Choose one that could use more attention. It’s the quality, not quantity, of our connections that count. Come up with one thing you could do to improve the quality and connection in that relationship. Put it into action.

There’s even a hymn about languishing! The words to the first verse are:

“Look ever to Jesus!
O languishing soul!
Tho’ waves of temptation,
Like mountains may roll,
He’ll never forsake thee,
His friendship is true;
Look ever to Jesus,
He’ll carry you through.”

Seek out fun and joy for the sake of your brain. The last two years have been hard on our brains and in turn, our moods. Chronic stress, worry, and uncertainty shift the chemistry and wiring of our brains to a more negative “new normal.” You can actively shift your brain back to a more positive baseline state by intentionally seeking out activities and experiences that bring you joy. Listen to music you love. Watch something that makes you laugh. Plan a fun, novel activity (new, positive experiences increase well-being) with someone you always have a good time with. Go for a walk in nature and soak up every beautiful sound, smell, and sight with your whole being.

Chapter 2, verses 11 through 13 of Song of Solomon is one of the many places in the Bible that reminds us that nature is a gift to us from God:

for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
¹² The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
¹³ The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.

Get moving. Use exercise, as often as you can, in whatever way you can, to elevate your mood, clear your head, and infuse your life with well-being. Try to do something physical every day, even if it’s just a short walk or stretches in a chair. Beyond the well-established mood improvements that come with exercise, a study from the University of Georgia demonstrated that a leisurely 20-minute stroll three days a week can significantly improve chronic feelings of fatigue.

Reflect on, and cultivate, meaning and purpose in your life. The “aimless” state of languishing may have to do with a loss of direction and purpose. The pandemic knocked every one of us off-center in some way. Many people had to just focus on surviving or getting through. Others of us have grown dizzy from the constant pivots and changes in our lives. Wash your groceries, no, wait, that’s not necessary. Get vaccinated, or does that provide enough protection? Wear any mask or is an N95 the only truly effective one? Set these discussions aside for a while. Maybe it’s even time to pick up those dreams and plans that got put on hold again. Maybe it’s time to make some new ones.

Here's another idea. Make a list of the times in your life, when you felt most alive or most "on purpose." What were the most meaningful seasons or years for you? Going forward, what do you want your life to "be" about? Your answers will likely point to activities, people, circumstances, or goals you could reconnect with.

Meditate on some of the familiar verses of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes:

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to plant, a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

In spite of, or because of our collective languishing, the pandemic put things in perspective for many of us. What did you learn about what matters most to you? Perhaps you also discovered that certain things mattered less than you'd originally thought.

If you can connect to a greater sense of meaning, purpose, or contribution in your life, that will pull and drive you forward and help you to shake off any blahs. If whatever matters to you also benefits your community, the world, or even just those around you, that's even better.

"We have all been universally affected by the pandemic, either in a large or small way," states Anjani Amladi, MD. "My hope is that through this collective experience, we develop more compassion and empathy for each other, specifically with regard to mental health [and] that we are better able to see the value of wellness: emotionally, mentally, and physically."

Today's devotion is an excerpt from *Moorings – Staying the Course*, a compilation of devotional letters written by Rev. Lam Kok Hiang while he was the Country Leader of Cru Singapore, a community that connects others to Christ. It was written last October.

It has been an unprecedented 18 months since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have had to constantly adapt to the evolving pandemic measures that inevitably affected all spheres of our lives, from family to social, work and church life.

The atmosphere of dismay in the community was certainly evident when our various plans were disrupted by the new measures.

Adjusting, adjusting, adjusting

As we try to cope with the situation while hoping for things to turn the corner, many of us are also fatigued and restless from the accumulative impact of living with the pandemic.

Our spirit has grown weary through the highs and lows. Our spirit has grown weary through the highs and lows, and we feel disconnected from others as a result of social distancing and working from home.

David writes in Psalm 6:2 (ESV): "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled."

To languish means "to become weak or feeble, to lose vigor and vitality, neglect and prolonged inactivity, failing to make progress."

Our languishing souls manifest themselves in some of the following ways:

- **Restless spirit** – an uneasy heart and unquiet mind; something feels amiss but we cannot pinpoint the cause(s);
- **Passionless** – lack of "heart" in our worship and lack of excitement in spiritual matters;
- **Jaded** – Our emotions have been on a roller coaster throughout Covid-19;
- **Isolated** – we feel disconnected from our community, and alone due to limited social interaction;
- **Joyless** – we have lost our inner joy as we become weary in our spirit.

We may have, at some point, been in a state of languish in our spiritual journey during this season. We know deep down that this is not where we want to be in nor where God intends for us to be.

How can we flourish and rediscover joy? By drawing near to God

Like David, we need to acknowledge our condition and ask God for His grace upon us (Psalm 6:2).

Draw near to God. God invites us to return to Him. We are limited on our own but our hope and confidence rests upon knowing that God is gracious and compassionate, and He hears the cries of those who call upon Him (Psalm 145:18).

Draw near to God. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8a). As we spend extended time with God, our souls will be recharged as we linger in His presence and nearness.

God invites us to return to Him. In Jeremiah 31:25, God's promise is sure:

"For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish." (Jeremiah 31:25, ESV)

"For I have given rest to the weary and joy to the sorrowing." (Jeremiah 31:25, NLT)

"I will refresh tired bodies; I will restore tired souls." (Jeremiah 31:25, MSG)

Hear now the closing prayer:

Heavenly and Most Precious Father, we come before you in humbleness. We are sorry for letting our lethargy and languishing for keeping us from spending time with you and your word. We know that you are our protector and our guide, and that you made us in your image. We also know that your love enfolds us in our darkness as well as our light, in our valleys of despair as well as our peaks of gladness, and in our loneliness as well as when we come together. We ask that you see us through this pandemic, exchange our fear for

this disease with respect for it, allow us to extend your grace to those with whom we differ, and to sow unity among all of your children. Be with those who have suffered as a direct result of Covid as well as the indirect impacts of lost loved ones, too much time alone, and the feeling of never-ending-ness. We are truly thankful for the many blessings you have bestowed upon us, for hearing our prayers and for giving this church and the individuals present the gift of Stephen Ministry. We thank you for the faith and the firm knowledge that you are our God, and we lift up our day – good and bad – to you. In your precious name, AMEN

Resources used in this presentation

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