

Emotional vaccine: Three ways we can move from 'languishing' to 'flourishing' in these testing times

September 28 2021, by Dougal Sutherland



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If you're feeling uninspired, stagnant and joyless, you're not alone. A sense of languishing is one of the dominant emotions of 2021 as we

navigate life in an ongoing pandemic and process other terrible world events alongside.

But although many people are struggling and these struggles are not to be ignored, the pandemic has also provided a chance to flourish—functioning well and feeling good, with a sense that life is meaningful and worthwhile, despite challenging circumstances.

Flourishing operates at the top end of the mental health continuum, with languishing at the bottom end.

A separate but related continuum relates to the experience of mental illness symptoms (from zero to severe). Key to this thinking is that [mental health](#) (languishing versus flourishing) and mental illness are independent from each other, and it is possible to flourish with mental illness symptoms and vice versa.

Recently published [Stats NZ data](#) provide an overview of New Zealanders' well-being during the pandemic and conclude:

"New Zealanders have remained resilient, with most people remaining happy, healthy and satisfied with their lives, despite the challenges [of the pandemic]."

For Māori in New Zealand, who generally experience [disproportionate rates of poor mental health](#) compared to other groups, recent [research](#) highlights that [positive outcomes](#) following the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown were nearly as frequent as adverse ones.

So, here are three strategies we can use to acknowledge the languishing but nevertheless move towards more experiences of flourishing.

1. Hold the 'and'

Holding the "and" is a psychological practice commonly used in several therapies, including dialectical behavior therapy ([DBT](#)). At its simplest, DBT encourages a balance between opposites.

Often, when we are coping with difficult experiences we fall into a habit of "all or nothing" or "black and white" thinking and we find it hard to see the gray. Lockdowns and the Delta variant are good examples of challenges where we might find it hard to see a balance between both extremes, oscillating between thinking "things will never get back to normal" or "everything is fine."

Holding the "and" in this scenario might look like acknowledging that our normal is being disrupted right now, and knowing that we have the tools to make it through in one piece. This style will give you permission and encouragement to feel frustrated and grateful, angry with moments of calm, and cautiously optimistic while feeling scared.

2. Practice active acceptance

When we have some ability to influence or control a situation, active coping or problem-solving strategies are generally best. But this approach of taking charge is much less effective when we are managing in circumstances beyond our control, like the current pandemic.

[Research](#) shows a style of coping called "acceptance coping" results in significantly less distress during such times.

Importantly, acceptance isn't a passive process. It's not giving up. Rather, it's reminding ourselves "this is how things are right now." Psychologists call this helpful, active acceptance, as opposed to resigning acceptance.

Key steps to acceptance are to notice and acknowledge thoughts and

feelings about a situation and then focus on what is important as we tackle the challenge. For example you may notice feeling sad, allow yourself to experience that emotion (acceptance) and then focus on something that is important for that day, for example dialing into a team meeting to check on colleagues.

3. Connect with others

A third strategy that helps nudge us towards flourishing is connecting with others. In our world of physical distancing, the good news is that with connection, it's quality over quantity. The benefits of being with others come largely from the emotional connection you make with another person.

Significant [research](#) has shown that experiencing frequent positive emotions (hope, joy and achievement) help people stay resilient and thrive even in times of crisis. Recent [studies](#) show co-experienced positive emotions—the good feelings you get when you really connect with someone—may be even more important than positive emotions experienced alone.

In even more compelling evidence, recent [research](#) examining more than one hundred risk factors for mental illness found that social connection was the strongest protective factor against depression. Finding ways of feeling connected with people in your bubble, as well as staying connected online with others, is one of the best strategies.

These key strategies of balance, acceptance and connection help us to move from languishing towards flourishing. Focusing on practicing these skills may serve as a psychological vaccine in these [pandemic](#) times.

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