



Finding your way **Back**

Breaking through the fog of Languish

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Moving from Languishing to Thriving

Think back, if you dare, to any given moment in March of 2020. See yourself there. As you began to accept the reality of the pandemic, coupled with the uncertainty of what could happen next. You were likely faced with an array of emotions that most of us hope never to revisit. So I thank you for looking back, even briefly. What were those emotions, feelings, and thoughts surrounding your experience?



Many of us were jolted into high-alert, as our individual thresholds for risk were challenged in unprecedented ways. Our collective brains' threat-detection systems (the amygdala) kicked into overdrive. We made contingency plans, stocked our homes with all the provisions we'd ever need and more, forbid our family members to leave the house.

Others of us shut down, emotionally and perhaps even physiologically, as we followed the lead of others, dulling our reactions, going with the flow. This kept us safe, routinized, and unfortunately, drained of momentum, motivation, and will. We were in survival mode, aka auto-pilot.

After speaking with multiple clients, colleagues, and friends, I believe it is safe to say that all of us grieved. We grieved the loss of:

What we knew to be normal

Our work routines

Feelings of financial security

Access to deep human connection



Not only did we grieve from what we had lost, but we grieved our perceived future losses. This mind-state is called anticipatory grief. It is that physically heavy feeling, we get in our solar plexus when our thoughts paint a view of a dreaded road ahead. With a virus, this feeling is even worse, because our primitive mind recognizes that something terrible is happening, but we can't see it or control it.

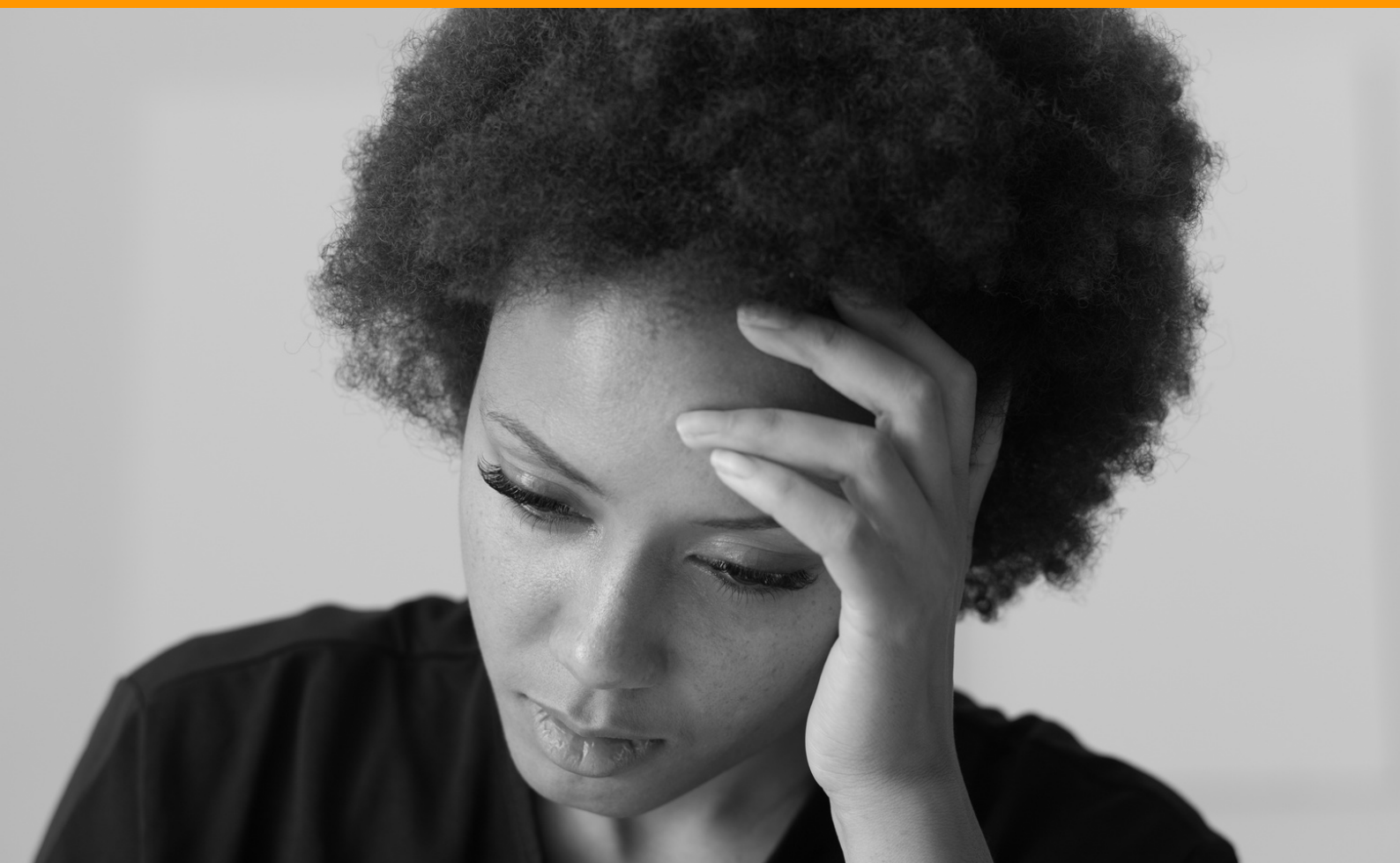
Dial forward to the present. Enter hope: the vaccine. Having gone through the emotional tsunami of the past year, the aftermath leaves us with a new state of being, and that is called languish. According to Adam Grant's recent article in the [New York Times](#) languish is a general feeling of "blah". Various dictionaries, for those needing a little more formality, define languish as a lack of vitality.

Deterioration. A weakness resulting from being forced to remain in an unpleasant place or situation. Emptiness. Stagnation. Sound familiar? As Grant eloquently put it, "The acute state of anguish has given way to a chronic condition of languish."

While languishing in itself is not terribly concerning, the future repercussions could be. Recent research by Sociologist Korey Keyes suggests that in the next decade, those who are currently experiencing languish are more likely to experience major anxiety, depression, or PTSD in the not-too-distant future.

Accepting our self-imposed state of languish, we tell ourselves we deserve a break, we need this time to recover. However, we are actually reverting to a self-protective measure, one that detaches us from our true selves and the world around us. While we stay in this zone of foggy non-reaction, the world around us has kept spinning.

So how do we break through the fog of languish? Let's look at what's really going on, starting with the way our brains are wired. Our stress is a chain reaction. The amygdala, an area of the brain that contributes to emotional processing, sends a distress signal to the "command center" of the brain, the hypothalamus. This communicates messages to the rest of the body through the nervous system, resulting in that rush of adrenaline associated with fight or flight. A hormone called cortisol is released, and in moderate doses this is fine. But when chronic longer-term stress is experienced, the body makes more cortisol than it has a chance to release.



High levels of cortisol erode the brain's ability to function properly, resulting in the loss of sociability and the avoidance of interactions with others. Stress can kill brain cells and even reduce the size of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for memory and learning.

What we can end up with is a vicious cycle between the amygdala and the hippocampus, keeping us in a constant state of fight or flight. So, it is no wonder that subconsciously, we want to languish! It's a relief from the stress cycle, but it's not healthy or sustainable.



Recovery from languish can be looked at through two lenses, your “inner work” and your “outer work”.

Inner Work

1 Simple Mindfulness Practice

Simply being present keeps our thoughts in the here and now. For example, observe your surroundings. What objects do I see in the small room? What are the patterns in the veins of this leaf? What are these sounds and smells? When we focus on “what is”, we can’t entertain thoughts about the past or fears about the future. At this moment, everything is okay.

2 Deep Breathing Resets

Like mindfulness, breathing can give us a grounding, calming, or even energizing sensation. When we need more energy, we can dip into a number of practices that will quickly re-oxygenate the system, and when we want to be calmer, long slow & deep is the way to go. In yogic philosophy there are dozens of breathing techniques called Pranayama. Investigate these and try them out. Just 30 seconds of a breathing exercise can change your physiology!

3 Gratitude/Book of Positive Aspects

I recommend to all my clients to acknowledge their gratitude for what is and what was. This could be in the form of writing, praying, or simply calling to mind one big gratitude before sleeping at night. Another similar exercise is [The Book of Positive Aspects](#). Because of the action involved in this process, you will experience an improved degree of focus and clarity. It’s an instant pick-me-up and creates a version of mindfulness that can be fun and light.



Outer Work

1 Create Boundaries

Constant interruptions, both at work and at home, can accumulate and amplify stress. While we want to be helpful and available for our colleagues and loved-ones, we can't put out good energy if we are being drained of it. Declare time and space. Create time blocks during which you dedicate to yourself. This is not selfish, it is self-care.

2 Mono-task

Hopefully the creation of boundaries will help with external interruptions, but what about distractions and wandering-mind? Try to focus on one task at a time. Give yourself a timeline, for example: I will spend 15 minutes on email. I will spend one hour on my article. I will walk my dog for ½ hour and enjoy the outdoors.



3 Reach Out

Languishing drains our ability to connect with others. Consider reaching out to one person each day; someone from your past, your present, or maybe even your future (in the form of someone you'd like to meet, through LinkedIn or other social media)! Without human interaction, we feel numb and isolated. Your gesture at connecting might just be the perfectly timed gift that someone needs at that moment.

This is the perfect time to kick languish to the curb. If you're anticipating a bit of separation anxiety from that "comfortably numb" feeling, remember that you can create mini-retreats into relaxation and quietude that mimic the good parts of languish, but eliminate the long term negative effects. Spring is just about to burst into summer, Covid-19 restrictions are lifting, and life is out there, eagerly waiting for all the good things you bring to it. You've been missed!

Overcoming languish requires awareness, courage, and reinforcement. I hope you'll be able to move into action and reap the benefits of this new way of being. However, you don't need to do this alone. We are available to help you with implementing these best practices and support any of your professional and personal needs. Our coaching helps leaders like you to learn skills and acquire habits that will reduce the overwhelm and make your steps toward "the new normal" feel encouraging and supported.

The Leadership Coach Group offers executive coaching, team coaching, 360-degree leadership assessments, leadership training, personality assessments (CliftonStrengths, DISC, Myers-Briggs), inspirational speakers, and much more.

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About Geraldine “Jerry” Anathan

Jerry is a dynamic coach for leaders and executives and works with dozens of high achievers in New York City and internationally. She is known for cutting through the clutter of the mind and helping her clients move into action, producing measurable results.

Certified psychological safety expert: One of 33 Certified Practitioners. 1:1 coach to medical staff: she has worked at Mt Sinai, Columbia Hospital, NY Presbyterian, and Roivant.

A longtime owner of Yoga East, a yoga, meditation, and wellness center.

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