

The Other Side of Languishing Is Flourishing. Here's How to Get There.

Research shows that the pandemic took a toll on our overall well-being and left many of us drained. Here are seven simple steps to get you thriving again.



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Published May 4, 2021 Updated May 6, 2021

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With vaccination rates on the rise, hope is in the air. But after a year of trauma, isolation and grief, how long will it take before life finally — *finally* — feels good?

Post-pandemic, the answer to that question may be in your own hands. A growing body of research shows that there are simple steps you can take to recharge your emotional batteries and spark a sense of fulfillment, purpose and happiness. The psychology community calls this lofty combination of physical, mental and emotional fitness “flourishing.” It is the exact opposite of languishing, that sense of stagnation Adam Grant wrote about recently for The Times.

“Flourishing really is what people are ultimately after,” said Tyler J. VanderWeele, an epidemiology and biostatistics professor and director of Harvard’s Human Flourishing Program. “It’s living the good life. We usually think about flourishing as living in a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good — it’s really an all-encompassing notion.”

The good news is that the scientific evidence related to flourishing is robust, and numerous studies show simple activities can lead to marked improvement in overall well-being. Here are some practical activities, backed by science, that can help you get started.

Assess yourself.

First, how do you know if you’re languishing, flourishing or somewhere in between? Simply asking yourself is an effective diagnostic tool, said Laurie Santos, a psychology professor at Yale who teaches a free 10-week course called “The Science of Well-Being.” Do you wake up ready to start your day or would you rather go back to sleep? Do you have a sense of purpose or do you find how you spend much of your day to be meaningless? “You are kind of the expert on your own sense of flourishing,” she said.

Dr. VanderWeele uses a 10-question assessment in his program at Harvard, which you can try here. Participants rate five areas of their lives on a scale of one to 10, with questions focusing on happiness

and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue and close social relationships. Just taking the quiz and reflecting on the questions it asks can put you on a path to making positive changes, Dr. VanderWeele said.

Savor and celebrate small things.

After a year of Zoom birthday parties and virtual graduations, many of us want to revel in gathering together again. Celebrations help to create and cement relationships. “It’s really important that post-pandemic we embrace more and more celebrating,” Dr. VanderWeele said.

But it’s not just the big occasions that should be marked. Acknowledging small moments is also important for well-being, research shows. Psychologists call it “savoring.” Savoring is about appreciating an event or activity in the moment, sharing tiny victories and noticing the good things around you.

A 2012 study of college students found that taking part in a savoring activity called “mindful photography” resulted in overall improvements in mood and a significantly greater sense of appreciation for college life. The students were instructed to take at least five photos of their everyday lives — friends, their favorite view on campus, books they enjoyed — twice a week for two weeks. Reflecting on the photos, and the small moments that brought them joy, helped the students focus on the good in their lives.

If snapping photos of your favorite things sounds like too much work, research shows you also benefit when you savor enjoyable experiences like luxuriating in a warm bath, spending the day with your best friend or taking an “awe” walk.

Try “Sunday dinner gratitude.”

Some people expressed gratitude more during the pandemic, whether it was clapping for health care workers or thanking a grocery checkout person. But creating a weekly gratitude ritual can cement the habit. Numerous studies show that taking time to reflect on what we’re grateful for improves our quality of life.

In a 2003 study, researchers instructed college students to list, once a week, five things they were grateful for, both big and small. (Some wrote that they were grateful for waking up that morning; one included gratitude for the Rolling Stones.) Compared to a control group, the students assigned to the gratitude intervention for 10 weeks had better feelings about life as a whole and fewer physical complaints.

A gratitude practice should not be a burden. Try to stack a new gratitude habit on a weekly ritual — like Sunday dinner with family; taking out the trash, or your weekly grocery run.

Do five good deeds.

Acts of kindness not only help others, they also can help you flourish. Research shows that performing five acts of kindness in a single day, once a week, can have a powerful effect. A 2004 study showed that

when college students spent a day doing five acts of kindness — like donating blood, helping a friend with a paper or writing a thank you note to a former professor — they experienced more significant increases in well-being than those who spread out five kind things over the course of a week.

Volunteer work can also improve well being. Dr. VanderWeele and other researchers looked at data from a cohort of nearly 13,000 older adults and found that participants who volunteered at least two hours a week during the study period experienced higher levels of happiness, optimism and purpose in life, compared to those who did not volunteer at all.

To make it easy, Dr. Grant recommends starting off with a daily “five-minute favor,” like introducing two people who could benefit from knowing each other, or sending an article or podcast link to a friend, saying you were thinking of them.

Look for communities and connection.

Even a quick chat with a stranger or a momentary bond with someone new can foster a sense of fulfillment, particularly when what researchers call a high quality connection occurs. “They don’t have to be lasting relationships or long interactions,” Dr. Grant said. “Sometimes people feel an extra spring in their step when they talk to a stranger on a plane or a subway, or when somebody greets them at a restaurant.”

Moments of being seen by other people, and being met with respect or even enthusiasm, can energize and invigorate us and help create bonds within our neighborhood or community.

As you emerge from pandemic life, try to reconnect with a community you’ve missed. It might be going back to church or choir practice, a running group or yoga class or even just hanging out at your local coffee shop. And don’t be afraid to chat with a stranger, reconnect with your barista or strike up a conversation at the dog park.

Find purpose in everyday routines.

What things do you look forward to each day? What gives your life meaning? Research has found that flourishing comes from daily routines, like working on a new skill or reaching out to thank the people you value in your life, and small moments of mastery, connection and meaning.

“There are lots of American adults that would meet the qualifications of feeling happy, but they don’t feel sense of purpose,” said Corey Keyes, a professor of sociology at Emory University. “Feeling good about life is not enough.”

While work doesn’t have to be the main driver behind your sense of purpose, studies show that reframing how you think about your job can improve your sense of satisfaction. Deepening relationships with co-workers and reminding yourself how your job contributes to a greater good can change how you think about work. If you’re an insurance agent, for example, perceiving your job as a means of helping people get back on their feet after an accident, rather than focusing on a rote task like processing claims, can make your work more fulfilling.

“People think that in order to flourish, they need to do whatever their version of winning the Olympics is, or climbing a mountain, or having some epic experience,” Dr. Grant said.

If you’re feeling down, choose a small project. It could be as simple as cleaning the kitchen or doing yard work, or even washing your pillow cases. Maybe you set a 10-minute timer and go for a short jog, or try a one-minute meditation. Completing a simple, impactful task can build toward a sense of accomplishment.

Try something new.

“Many of us think we need to change our circumstances, get a job where we earn tons more money, or switch our relationships, buy something new,” said Dr. Santos. “But what the research really shows is that flourishing comes from a different set of behaviors and habits.”

And now that life is getting back closer to normal, there are more opportunities to branch out. You can join a book club or running group, take a pottery class, visit a museum or outdoor art exhibit, try a new recipe, explore a nearby trail or neighborhood or test out a free language learning app like Duolingo.

Most important for overall well being, Dr. Keyes said, is being interested in life; a sense of satisfaction or happiness tends to follow that. The pandemic has challenged us because we haven’t been able to pursue many of our previous interests, he said. “The first key to feeling good about life is to seek out new interests,” he said.

Dr. Grant also said learning a skill and then teaching it to someone, or taking on passion projects as hobbies, can lead to fulfillment. The end of the pandemic offers a new opportunity to reflect, he said, and to ask a new question: “How do I want to spend my time?”