

# Not Terrible, Not Great: Tips for Navigating the Land of Languishing

BY ROBYN KELTON

*Q: How are you?*

*A: Meh.*

## WHAT IS LANGUISHING, AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE?

A little over a year into the COVID pandemic, the term “languishing” began to make its way into popular news articles, TEDTalks, therapy sessions, and even workplace water cooler conversations. Even if you have not heard of the term *languishing*, there is a good chance that you or someone you know is familiar with the feeling, especially as we round year three of the global pandemic.

In April of 2021, Industrial Organizational Psychologist Dr. Adam Grant wrote a piece for the New York Times suggesting that languishing, or the sense of stagnation or emptiness, absence of joy, or a general sense of “blah,” was the dominant emotion of 2021. Languishing is often overlooked on an individual basis because it is absent of any diagnosable mental health disorder (e.g., depression), and it is often overlooked in the workplace because it does not include the loss of energy often associated with burnout. While it is not mental illness or workforce burnout, it is also a far cry from optimal wellbeing or flourishing. It is the emotional land of the in-between—it is not a barren wasteland; it is no paradise either. Languishing is when a person is able to do what they need to do and still feel some sense of meaning in life, but their excitement is dulled, motivation dampened, things feel stuck. I liken languishing to the word “meh.” It’s not bad, but it is certainly not good.

In the early childhood education (ECE) workforce, languishing may manifest itself in many ways, including a teacher with a bit less “pep in their step” who is still committed to their work with young children, but seems dragged down by an unseen weight; a family child care provider or center director who, despite operating a high-quality program, struggles to find the motivation needed to begin the process of moving to the next level in their quality rating and improvement system (QRIS); a coach who is deeply invested in the success of their coachees but goes to work each day with the sense that every day seems just like the last; or a staff member who is good at their job, but feels like they are just going through the motions.

## WHAT DO WE DO IF WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE LAND OF LANGUISHING?

There are a number of recommendations to help address languishing, but the three I find most appealing are naming and claiming, finding flow state, and seeking out support.

**Naming and claiming.** Start by giving voice to how you feel instead of suppressing your emotions. Sharing your honest emotions with those you know and trust, including yourself, is one step toward improved wellbeing. This might mean carving out dedicated time for introspection—journaling or reflecting on how you are feeling. Or, maybe this means that instead of replying “fine,” when a close friend asks how you are doing, reply with

“I’m languishing a bit,” and then take time to authentically share how you are feeling. Often just being able to label how you feel has a strong positive impact on your wellbeing.

In your work in the ECE field, **NAMING AND CLAIMING** may simply mean sharing information (articles, TEDTalks, etc.) about languishing with staff or colleagues so that those who encounter these feelings may be better able to name and claim them themselves. It seems important to point out that I would **never** recommend labeling someone else as languishing or pressure another person into disclosing how they are feeling or coping. Rather, we can normalize the idea that we all may, from time to time, find ourselves in the land of languishing.

**Finding flow state.** “What is flow state?” you ask. Flow is that feeling when you are so enthralled and engaged with what you are doing that the world seems to fade away into the background. For some people, this might be exercising (e.g., running, swimming, yoga). For others, it could be a hobby (e.g., reading a captivating book, knitting, puzzling). For me, it is gardening. When I am in the garden, I truly get so caught up pulling weeds, planting seeds, and pruning flowers that I completely lose all track of time. This has resulted in some unpleasant sunburns. Not great for my skin, but wonderful for my wellbeing. Flow state can also occur when you are deeply immersed in work-related tasks so long as you are not interrupted or distracted. I can proudly say that while writing this blog, I turned off my email notifications, set aside my to-do list, and allowed myself to be fully dedicated to solely working on this blog.

In the ECE field, **FINDING FLOW STATE** might mean sharing information and ideas about flow state with providers, directors, or staff. You could ask others to reflect on how they make time in their schedules to find flow and be open yourself to the idea that there might be ways to adjust work schedules to help support those activities (e.g., allowing teachers lesson planning time outside of the presence of children). Another idea may be organizing the staff lounge in a way that allows staff to engage in flow state activities (e.g., a large group puzzle in the breakroom or a reading nook for staff in the lounge). You could also provide flow state materials for staff to take home (e.g., staff lending library with captivating non-work-related books, Sudoku pages) and share resources (e.g., post information about a local gardening club). Whatever your flow states are, the key is to keep it to one defined task at a time and to protect the time from interruptions.

**Seeking support.** Research often finds that one of the best predictors of positive wellbeing is social support. It is no surprise that recent research examining coping during the pandemic has found the same. The presence of a strong support system is protective for our social, emotional, and even physical health. Take a few minutes and think about the support systems you have. Is there someone you can be open and honest with about how you are feeling? Even if the pandemic has made it difficult, at times, to physically seek out support, technology has given us numerous resources to form meaningful connections in a virtual world.

In the ECE field, **SEEKING SUPPORT** by connecting with others in your line of work might be a great place to start building support. This could mean joining or encouraging your staff to join professional organizations (e.g., the National Association for the Education of

Young Children or the National Association for Family Child Care ). If you are a family child care provider or center director, it might mean seeking out a mentor or joining a professional learning community with others in similar roles. Connecting with those who can relate to you helps ease a sense of isolation and improves problem-solving.

We are living through unprecedented times so above all else, please remember to be kind to yourself and practice self-compassion. Further, if you feel like you might benefit from additional support or someone to talk with, take a look at this list of mental health resources put together by the [American Psychological Association](#).

If you would like to grow professionally with other ECE leaders in a supportive professional learning community, consider joining one of the McCormick Center's [leadership academies](#) or other [learning opportunities](#).

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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