

# How Languishing at Work Impacts Your Life with Corey Keyes (S6: Ep.2) (Transcript)

## PODCAST

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**CHRIS:** Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and how to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon and my guest today is author and sociologist Corey Keyes.

Corey is best known for his work on Flourishing and Languishing, which he describes as the level of a person's mental health. He currently serves as professor emeritus of Sociology at Emory University and has authored multiple books on positive psychology, most recently "Languishing, How to feel alive again in a world that wears us down".

Corey says there's much more to flourishing than simply the absence of mental illness, especially at work. Things like belonging, community, a sense of purpose and finding meaning in your work can go a really long way. But, according to his research, people are much more likely to languish when they're at work than when they are at home. And that's the challenge for today's workplace.

Here's my conversation:

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**Chris Congdon:** Corey, thank you so much for joining us at work better today.

**Corey Keyes:** Wonderful to be here with you, Chris.

**CC:** Well, Corey, I'm really interested in talking with you about 2 of your books and they feel very much like they're kind of 2 sides of the same coin, so to speak. So you've written a book called Flourishing, and most recently you've written a book called Languishing, and there's a lot of conversation going on about languishing right now, and so I'd like to just start out if you would help us understand what flourishing and languishing are.

**CK:** Well, flourishing is the word I chose to be clear about what I meant when I said, I'm talking about mental health. You use the words mental health with ordinary people.

People will usually assume you're either talking about mental health problems, more mental illness or you're talking about mental health as merely the absence of mental health problems or mental illness. For me, and my research was about the presence of positive mental health with the presence of good mental health. I wanted to be very clear that when I'm talking about mental health I'm talking about something good, and I use the word flourishing. I have a set of questions for a team that measure the presence of very positive qualities of life. Languishing is another word that I was very careful about choosing, because I wanted to talk about also the problems associated with the absence of good mental health.

And the point of talking about these 2 concepts flourishing or mental health and languishing. The absence of good mental health is that the majority of the world's population is free of mental illness in any typical year. We're talking about 80 to sometimes 90% maybe a workforce or a population is free of mental illness. Now, the usual assumption is that 80 to 90% of people are mentally healthy. My work shows very clear that the absence of mental illness does not mean the presence of flourishing.

You could be free of mental illness, but you could also have the absence of good mental health, so you could be stuck right in the middle, languishing inbetween mental illness and flourishing or good mental health.

**CC:** I get that. So I've noticed that you're you're very precise in your language. For example languishing doesn't necessarily mean I'm suffering from depression or anxiety when you talk about mental illness. But I may still not be flourishing just because I'm not depressed or don't have anxiety doesn't mean that I'm flourishing. Is that right?

**CK:** Exactly. And it's a very important point, because that category of languishing doesn't mean you're not suffering, but you're suffering perhaps in a different way from the kind of suffering that people with depression and anxiety, experience. You're suffering from is the absence of well-being.

People describe it as feeling like they're slowly dying inside. They describe their situation as I feel empty, or a deep sense of emptiness. I feel stuck like I can't grow, or I can't go anywhere, and there's a variety of descriptors, and that emptiness and that stuckness, are just 2 of the qualities that describe languishing, that make up a kind of suffering that we, we ignore, that causes all kinds of problems for people.

**CC:** Yeah, that's what I wanted to ask you about Corey, like why should we be paying attention to languishing like, I mean, like somebody might say, well, that's just kind of part of life that every now and then you have you have the blues, or you know you're not feeling at your best. Why, why should we be thinking about languishing?

**CK:** Well, it's true that it doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to be languishing for a long period of time. Now I want to make the distinction between languishing where it comes and goes, and you respond to it effectively, because the way I like to think about it, Chris, is language is sort of like an existential alarm clock that goes off much like our alarm clock in the morning that tells us to wake up, right, and be aware and get ready and do something. Well existentially, languishing is a feeling that comes on after when you started to lose really good things in your life like a purpose in life, a sense of belonging and contribution. And as you start to lose those things, that alarm clock goes off and says, "wait a minute. Oh. I'm losing something very valuable. I need to go back and recover those good things." What happens is that a lot of people ignore it and they stay in that place of languishing too long. And when you stay in that place too long, it causes all kinds of problems, not the least of which it becomes a gateway for the onset of mental illness.

**CC:** So whenever there's a list of questions, I always want to look at the questions and go well, "how do I feel about these?" "Does this pertain to me?" So when I went through the list of questions in your book about, you know, are you languishing? I mean most of them I could pretty quickly say, "No," like, you know, "I feel a sense of purpose and meaning," and those kinds of things, but there were some where I was like. "Hmm!

Well, I wonder about that." So you know, like the question that really made me laugh. But but I recognized myself, and it was the bit about brain fog, you know. Like, have I ever stood in the shower and wondered whether I washed my hair? I was like, "Oh, my gosh!" That is, I have had that for sure. So I'm wondering is languishing something that, like you either have it or you don't? Or are there different, like degrees of languishing that one can have?

**CK:** You can be languishing mildly, moderately, or severely.

And so here's the distinction. There's a diagnostic set of criteria I use to measure the presence of flourishing, that is, are you mentally healthy? If you don't meet those criteria, and we can talk about them if you want, you are, you are languishing. So if you're not flourishing, you're languishing to some degree. Now mild, languishing is that you might feel some of the qualities that I use in my questionnaire, a couple times a week, but not every day, or almost every day, in order to flourish, you have to experience a certain amount of those qualities almost every day or every day. Anything less than almost every day you begin to mildly languish. So yeah, and then moderate is sort of like, maybe once or twice a week I experience them, and severe languishing is maybe once or never in the past month did I experience a certain amount of these things, so severe languishing is like literally the complete absence of well-being.

**CC:** Corey, could you give us just a couple examples of some of those flourishing indicators? I think people would be really interested to hear about that.

**CK:** Well, 1st set of questions I ask have to do with feeling good, emotional well-being. And I ask people, “Have you felt happy, satisfied or interested in life?” You can answer that from never in the past month to every day, or almost every day, yeah, or somewhere in between. To flourish, you have to have just one of those 3 happy, satisfied, or interested life almost every day or every day. Then I ask 11 questions that get at what I call “functioning well”, 5 of which have to do with social well being so, for instance, “how often did you feel that you had something important that you are contributing to to society, or in this place? Your workplace”. We call that social contribution.” How often did you feel that you belonged to the community?” We call it integration. That’s just 2 of the social wellbeing. And then there’s 6 questions about psychological well-being. “How often did you like most parts of your personality?” “How often did you have warm, trusting relationships with others?” And last, “how often did you feel that you were confident to think and express your own ideas and opinions?” Those are just 3 of the 6 psychological wellbeing. Now, to flourish, you have to have 6 out of any of those 11, just a minimum of 6 or more almost every day, or every day.

So flourishing is a combination of feeling good about your life where you’re also functioning well with purpose, belonging contribution, and so forth.

**CC:** Right. So I think you said something that’s worth distinguishing there a little bit between feeling and functioning. Can you talk about that a little bit, because I know in your book, in “Languishing”, you wrote, “don’t be fooled by your feelings”, so can you pull that apart for us a little bit that difference between feeling and functioning?

**CK:** Yeah, the feeling stuff is is where we we have spent. We, the research literature and people who often talk about well-being. That’s what they’re really referring to. It’s a i call it the obsession with happiness.

**CC:** Okay.

**CK:** The feeling good is about emotions. How do you feel about what you’re doing or your life? And we focus a lot on that when we often pursue it. The problem with pursuing feelings or emotions is that they weren’t designed to be enduring. They don’t stick around because that’s not their point. Feelings are kind of like that windsock at the airport. They tell us which way the wind is blowing.

**CC:** Great analogy.

**CK:** Right, and then it moves on. Feelings don’t last, and they’re not designed to last. But here’s the thing. Feelings, if you pursue them often directly, right? That’s the point. You keep chasing them like that greyhound chasing that fake rabbit going around the track. You never catch it. And it doesn’t last. But if you focus on functioning well, right? Creating a life where it has purpose and direction, creating a life where you have warm, trusting relationships, creating a life where you have a sense of belonging and contribution.

Those things don’t disappear like the rabbit that the greyhounds are chasing, they tend to stick around. The point here is that feeling good should often come as a result of accomplishing a life where you’re able to function well. When that happens, where the feelings come as a result of prioritizing functioning well, those feelings tend to be more durable and sustainable. But if you prioritize feeling good you can achieve that all kinds of ways that have nothing to do with ethics or quality of character.

**CC:** So it's possible, Like, if I'm if I'm hyper focused on feeling happy, I might not fully appreciate the value of the fact that I'm finding purpose in life and that I feel like I belong, and that I'm a member of a community, and I have trusting relationships. Those really enduring kinds of things. Is that right?

**CK:** Yes, and if you were to place this in the context of work. There's nothing wrong with getting a jolt of good feeling because you've finally accomplished something you are working towards: a pay raise up some praise and so forth, or prestige, or right? Those things are fine, but those aren't things that happen every day or weekly.

What's important here, is there's nothing wrong with pursuing those things, but imagine a workplace where pretty much every day you feel confident to think and express your ideas. Every day You like most parts of who you are when you're there, working every day, you feel like you're contributing things of worth and value, and every day you have a sense of belonging to your workplace, and it's like a feeling of community.

Now those things are there with you, with success and without success, providing really good feelings. So I think what we do is we miss the fact that that's the functioning well, stuff should be part of the fabric of our life and not just pursuing happiness as a result of events like raises and paychecks, and praise.

**CC:** Sure different kinds of rewards.

So you've you've broken down the difference between languishing at work. We're just talking about work a little bit and languishing in the rest of your life in your personal life. Can you tell us a little bit about how that works like? Can I languish in one and not in the other, or vice versa. So tell us about your research about that.

**CK:** Well, this is just very new research. And I, as I said, I shared this with you, and I'm doing and collaborating with colleagues, the Director of the Center at this school of business at University, Illinois, Oscar Yabarra. And what we did was, take my questionnaire, and we contextualized it for the 1st time. And so we asked the 14 questions and made them very clear that answer these questions about how you feel and how you're functioning when you're at work.

And then we ask this 14 questions again. Now imagine everything else when you're outside of work, when you're at home in your community, in your neighborhood, how do you feel, and how are you functioning? And that was the first time we sort of asked those questions that specifically in terms of context, and what we found I was astonished by, because what we found was that there's a significant group of people where their mental health changes depending on whether they're at work or whether they're at home.

So, for instance, we found that 25% of the employees we surveyed just recently were languishing while they're at work but flourishing when they are at home. Now that's just remarkable in and of itself. When they walk out that door they are leaving behind good mental health. When they walk through that door and into work they're entering into a context where they lose their mental health and they start languishing. That's 25% of the employees and then 9% we're following. They were flourishing when they entered the work, and while they were at work, when they went home they were languishing. But here's the thing much more likely to flourish away from work, much more likely to languish at work.

Then there's this group of 35% that are flourishing in both places. That's good news, And then 31% are languishing in both places. Neither home nor work is conducive to their mental health. So that was quite astounding because we tend to think that we take our mental health with us everywhere we go.

So here's the thing we found, 56%, for the employees were languishing while they were at work, 40% were languishing at home. People are much more likely to languish when they're at work than when they are at home. And that's the challenge for the workplace.

**CC:** Sure. So, Corey, just to make sure I'm tracking with your findings. Is there like a carryover effect? So if I'm if I'm flourishing at work, am I more likely to be flourishing at home, or in my personal life, or Vice versa?

**CK:** It's slightly more likely. So the largest group, 35%, were flourishing in both places. Think of that: barely just over a third. That's not necessarily good news, because that's not a lot of mental health, 35% are flourishing in both. 31% are languishing in both places, that's the second largest group. The 3rd largest group, 25% were languishing at work, but flourishing at home. And the rarest group that's 9% flourished at work, but languished at home. So the good news, if you want to call it, that is barely over a third are doing well in all of their life, but only 35%.

**CC:** Corey, since we're you know, the name of our podcast is Work Better, clearly, we would love to see people flourishing at work. Do you have some advice, some suggestions that our listeners can take away and say like, how can we help people move from languishing at work to flourishing?

**CK:** Oh, yes, There's a study that I wrote about in my recent book, and it was a study done by some medical doctors at University, California, San Francisco and they looked at 3 specialties that were among the most challenging and stressful, and those specialties were emergency medicine, general surgery, and obstetrics and gynecology. Now they chose them, of course, because there those are 3 of the demanding specialities.

And what they found was whether these doctors were languishing or flourishing, had nothing to do with the level of stress they were experiencing. What really mattered was the atmosphere. I'm going to use the word atmosphere generally, and here's how they measured it: They asked people whether they were working in a calm atmosphere. The second was, "are you working in a place where there's interpersonal warmth, openness, and trust?" Third, "do you have a workplace where your coworkers understand that you will have bad days?" Fourth., "do you have coworkers who are there for you who will support you when you need it, especially when you have bad days?" Those 4 qualities of your work atmosphere, I call it, were far more predictive whether you were languishing or flourishing.

So people who are working in very demanding situations can do hard, if they work in a calm atmosphere where there's warmth, openness, trust, where they have coworkers who understand they will have bad days, and those coworkers have your back. But you're much more likely to languish as a result of being under a lot of demands and adversity when you don't have those things going for you. My recommendation is that workplaces need to understand that they need to create that kind of I'll call it, supportive atmosphere and environment.

**CC:** Our vocabulary might be slightly different, Corey, but we've been thinking a lot about how to create a sense of community at work. And when I listen to the things that you're describing things like trust or feeling like people understand you're going to have good days and bad days, and those kind of attributes feel like that's part of a culture that organizations can actually try to foster to be able to help people you know, move from languishing and start getting them over to flourishing.

**CK:** I wanna problematize a little bit of just calling it culture. But that's definitely part of it. I mean, you, you focused on trust, and that's interesting in and of itself. That's a commodity that is extremely, extremely valuable. It's necessary to enable people to take risks and you're not going to get anywhere in life where you don't take risks.

But you didn't talk about openness and warmth, and those are sure important, and we don't prioritize that. Now I talk about in my book in a chapter where I had to change the way I taught in order to really get my material across. And what it required was first, me opening up about the challenges I face because I was teaching a course on mental health and illness, and I was teaching a course on happiness. So I began to use my own stories of challenge and adversity and setbacks as the groundwork for opening up to them about how difficult it is to achieve mental health, where I experienced challenges with mental illness, where I experienced setbacks and pursuing happiness. Serious ones. Openness isn't just about sharing good stuff. It's about the ability to share the suffering, the vulnerability, the sense of fear sometimes that we are all human, that we all share these things. As soon as I opened up about that trust flowed out of them because they started trusting me with their stories and each other. So I'm just talking about one of the 4 dimensions of that, and that requires a place where we can let down our roles and be human in the fact that we can bring our full humanity to work.

**CC:** It can be hard, you know. For a lot of us, you know, we learned early on that you weren't supposed to bring: that level of openness into the workplace. You know you were supposed to kind of separate the two, and you know, I think we learn every day on social media that you know everybody shares the positives about the great thing that happened, or the great accomplishment that they had, or their children have, like you feel like that's really not the place to, you know put out into the world that you know you're struggling, unless maybe you've resolved it.

Corey, I want to shift just a little bit before I let you go and talk about a thing that we think about a lot, of course, because of the nature of what we do, which is the physical space that we exist in when we come to work. And I'm wondering, based on what you're learning, if you have observations or ideas for us about how the physical environment could actually help people flourish?

**CK:** Hmm, gotta pause here because I'm thinking about some of the qualities that go into flourishing like liking most parts of your personality. There's other aspects of social wellbeing like "I can make sense of what's going on around me in the social world" or in your case "I can make sense of what's going on in the workplace."

I can tell you from the beginning, I don't think it's gonna be rooms where you could play games and have refreshments and that's not necessarily the answer, because a lot of high-tech places seem to think that you know the great answer to the quality of life. I don't think it begins to scratch the surface of a sense that you could be accepting of other people, you can become accepting of yourself that you can have confidence that they can express your ideas and opinions.

Those kinds of places, I would think, forgive me, I'm biased as an educator and as a professor, but things we're talking about require a kind of auditorium, like a Tedx talk on a regular basis, where you engage these ideas in ways that are relevant to the entire workplace. Where you think they're so sacred that you take moments half hour, an hour of your time, on a weekly basis to talk meaningfully about these things as a workplace, and how you dedicate towards it and how you can teach management and employees. Wouldn't it be interesting that you have sort of these kinds of equivalents of learning halls where you talk about these kinds of things.

**CC:** Eric Kleinenberg at NYU, has done a lot of work about what he calls social infrastructure, in creating places that encourage people to come together. Place can't solve for the issues if somebody's really languishing, but might it lay the groundwork, so to speak, or the infrastructure, if you will, for people to begin to open up to one another, to feel like just to start to get to know each other, and just feel like, that's that's the way we do things here, you know that we're open.



**CK:** Well, I often wonder if you were to take the 14 questions that I use to measure this, and imagine having a conversation with your team or an annual review, right? And one question that I asked, that I find very intriguing: “are you being challenged to grow and become a better person?” That’s personal growth.

People who are flourishing often say almost every day that I feel challenged to grow and become a better person. By better person that means a better kind of person. Now can you imagine having a conversation with somebody at work about, “Well, I’m not being challenged to grow and become a better person,” and then thinking through, well “How could we add that to your work? What could we do to challenge you to grow? What can we do to challenge you specifically on becoming a better place, better person in this place?”

Now, maybe there’s a physicality to that. But I’d like to think those kinds of conversations happen when you first begin to measure this and realize how many people are languishing in your team. And then you have these meaningful conversations about the workplace but you can’t have them if you don’t really think you can do anything about them. Don’t even bother, because I would like to believe you could add direction and meaning to people’s life at work, but you have to have that conversation. So if they don’t have purpose, I believe, for many, you could now imagine people are walking around your workplace that the things they do don’t contribute anything of worth and value to the work. Now, how could that be?

We should be having a conversation around that. So in part, I think there’s a physical nature to this, but you have to want to ask these questions and you have to be willing to hear the answers. And then you have to be realistic about what can and can’t be done.

But the point I want to leave you with is this: to flourish, you only have to have 7 out of the 14 questions. We don’t have everything.

**CC:** Not Perfect.

**CK:** No, nobody’s flourishing the same way, and you don’t have to make everything happen for everyone. You just have to get them to focus on 6 out of the 11 functioning well, that they think can be changed. And at least one of the 3 emotional wellbeing will probably come online if you get people to function well, but only 6 out of the 11. Now I think that’s doable in any workplace.

**CC:** Yeah, yeah, it. It feels it feels attainable.

So Corey, I feel like you have given us so much to think about. I’m really going to encourage readers to pick up Corey’s book *Languishing* and read it, because I think you’re just going to find that there’s so much there to challenge yourself, not only individually but as a leader and as part of an overall organization about what things we could be doing to help people move from languishing at work into flourishing. So, Corey, thank you so much for joining us today. I’m really grateful that you shared your research with us today.

**CK:** Well, I'm grateful to have the opportunity to do so. Thank you.

Chris: That's all for today, thanks for listening. Stay tuned next week when I talk to Microsoft's Mike Pell. Mike describes himself as a "envisioner" and is recognized as one of the leading innovators in tech. He currently leads the Microsoft Garage, Microsoft's outlet for experimental projects. He says our future workplaces will feature more ambient computing, where the tech is seamlessly a part of each room. It was a fascinating conversation you won't want to miss.

If you enjoyed today's conversation, would you share the episode with a friend or colleague, like us and visit us at [steelcase.com/research](https://steelcase.com/research) to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.