

Self and wellbeing  
Psychology

## Feeling empty inside, one sociologist found answers by exploring his own traumatic childhood

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Not out of the woods yet: Corey Keyes says that until you deal with things from the past which trigger you, you will never flourish for long enough. Photograph: Audra Melton/The Observer

Along the way Corey Keyes developed concepts of languishing and flourishing which others have found helpful

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Close

When he was 16, Corey Keyes was finally doing well after a brutal childhood. He got high grades at school, played quarterback on the football team, and was living with his loving grandmother in Wisconsin, USA.

But, the sociologist and professor emeritus of Emory University writes in his new book, *Languishing: How To Feel Alive Again in a World That Wears Us Down*, he was living on autopilot, throwing himself into every activity going. Whenever he slowed down, everything felt “drained of colour”. A feeling of “restless emptiness” gnawed at his insides. Terrified this feeling might haunt him all his life, he determined to become a sociologist to find out if other people had this same sense of “running on empty”, eventually coining the terms “languishing” and its antidote “flourishing”, or good mental health.

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Languishing isn't depression, or feeling depressed, and it's not a diagnosis. “It's a normal reaction to a lot that goes on in our life,” says Corey. “Sadness and fear are normal. But sadness can become depression, and fear can become anxiety when it persists. Equally, when you stay in a state of languishing for too long, it becomes a very debilitating, dangerous thing, just like depression. I'm not trying to pathologize languishing. I'm simply saying, if you don't listen

to that empty silence in yourself and do something about it, it will get worse. Trust me, I've been there."

Languishing is a feeling many of us are familiar with, however outwardly successful we may consider ourselves to be. We might have a good job, family, friends, financial security, and more, but the building blocks of flourishing, which are vital if we are to thrive, are missing. Languishing, says Corey, "is the absence of wellbeing. It's the absence of the really good things that make life meaningful and worth living. We all languish in a slightly different way. You may feel you don't have purpose in life. You don't belong. You're not contributing. You don't have warm relationships. You're not growing as a person."

But if you tick some of the above, you're closer to flourishing which, says Corey, hinges on a purposeful life. Happily, it is there for the taking, even if you suffer from mental ill health. It is a life underpinned by community and warm and trusting relationships, spiritual practice, curiosity and playfulness. The bonus ball, says Corey, is that we can attain these tenets of wellbeing on our own: we don't need to wait for doctors or public systems to provide them.

Pursuing this internal path, as opposed to the external one of so-called success that is contingent on others and on factors we cannot control, builds up immunity to the stresses of modern life. It enables resilience and staves off anxiety, fear, depression. "So if you have depression, like I do, it recedes into the background, it becomes the ghost, and flourishing becomes the friend. That's why I call flourishing my North Star. The more I focus on it, the longer I stay in recovery from depression."

The roots of that depression, and the jagged sense of not belonging or of not mattering to anyone that periodically swoops in on him, even to this day, lie in a past Corey believed he had "outsmarted". Happily married to Lisa, his college sweetheart, he was a lauded academic and comfortably off. But as we talk, he opens up about what he now recognises as a traumatic childhood and the PTSD it precipitated.

**He grew up** in a small town in north Wisconsin. His father was a construction worker and an alcoholic, and frequently worked away. His mother abandoned Corey and his big sister when he was a baby. When Corey was four years old, his father remarried. His stepmother had two daughters of her own and, a few years in, the new family unit moved to Florida, Corey's father chasing fair-weather work in the south. He says that, when his father was out, his stepmother was physically abusive to Corey and his sister, two years his senior.

"She never touched or hit her own children," Corey tells me, "but we were hammered pretty much every day. Hit, slapped, kicked, hair pulled. I was bitten a couple of times. Cigarettes were put out on me. It was very violent. My

father was not there, and he rarely came home before seven in the evening, and when he did, it was obvious he had stopped at the bar on the way, so there was no protection and no awareness whatsoever that this was going on. It seemed futile to tell him.”

He has two memories of his father. One is of waiting on the front porch for him to come home on his birthday, convinced he would, for once, come bearing a gift. He did not. The other is of forgetting to wash the dog and his father flipping out. “I had to sleep outside.”

“There was a lot of what psychiatrists call ‘dissociation’. When we were in the house, my sister and I never, never talked. It was survival. You go deep inside. You hide, you know what’s going on, but there’s a piece of you that goes into the background that nobody can touch. That’s the best you can do as a child. That’s actually what saved us.” At school Corey was constantly in detention. “My life was going in a bad direction.”

When Corey was 12 years old, his step-uncle came to visit and noticed “this extremely odd behaviour”, the two stepdaughters and the parents talking at mealtimes and around the house, Corey and his sister never saying a word. They only spoke to each other when they were alone. His step-uncle alerted Corey’s grandparents and arrangements were made for Corey and his sister to be adopted by them. “Transplanted” to a place of love, Corey blossomed. Agonisingly, his beloved grandfather died two years later. “It was very hard on me. I thought, I didn’t have you long enough.” Sensing this, his grandmother told her 14-year-old grandson a story.

“She told me how she found me in the crib about a week after I’d been born. My mother had just left and didn’t come back. We had been left for days, me and my two-year-old sister. My dad was working in construction out of town. My grandmother had been calling and calling, and so, after several days of not getting any response, she goes over to the house and finds me in our crib. Our pants are full of you know what, we hadn’t eaten, I had pneumonia. She said, ‘There was very little they could do for a barely week-old infant with pneumonia. Corey, you need to understand how strong you were. How strong you are. You beat pneumonia. I want you to know you are a survivor.’

“There was a part of me that wished I had never heard that story – that my mother just walked away. It hollows me out to even think about it and talk about it to this day. But I have a hunch that if I hadn’t been adopted and tasted what love was like, my fierce determination wouldn’t be there. I knew I was worth something.”

He resolved “to be seen”, achieved in part through his academic research which he saw as his “higher purpose”, all the while trying “to forget that, to most people, I was considered trash”. Then one day, at the height of his career, his “higher purpose” was swept from under him when a book was published that,

he writes, “introduced a model of flourishing that was remarkably similar to my own”. His reaction was stark: it “took my dignity, my purpose, and everything good that I had to give. The world just took it.” That’s how it felt to Corey, testament to how deep his insecurity was embedded in his psyche.

Today he sees this episode for what it was: a midcareer breakdown, one that showed him that, “no matter how much you’ve tasted flourishing, until you deal with the things from the past that trigger you, you will not flourish for long enough.

“It’s also simple to say that, if you put all your purpose in your work, it can be like placing a very big bet with the last bit of money you have. Maybe you’ll win that bet...” And maybe you won’t.

The night of his breakdown, he told his wife that he couldn’t go on; he was exhausted, nobody needed him. “I remember the pause, and then she said those four words: ‘But I need you.’ I knew she meant what she said. To this day, I’m like, whoa! I feel it right now. Whoa!”

What saved Corey from his past is his own theory of wellbeing: that if love and human connection prevail, if you are needed by another, if you matter to them and serve them, and others, you have gifted yourself purpose and meaning and the path to flourishing is once again yours for the taking. “That’s the whole message,” says Corey, “and the hope.”

*Languishing: How To Feel Alive Again in a World That Wears Us Down* is published by Torva at £20, or buy a copy from [guardianbookshop.com](https://guardianbookshop.com) for £17

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