

How to Stop Feeling “Meh”

I recently watched a [TED talk](#) by one of my favorite authors (who actually grew up in Bloomfield Township, MI!), Adam Grant, an organizational psychology professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He spoke about languishing, which is a sense of emptiness, stagnation, and ennui that we have all felt over the course of the pandemic. In other words, languishing is characterized by feeling an emotion of giving up, or that nothing matters, embodying a one-syllable, three-letter word: “meh.”

Speaking for myself, I’ve definitely felt several highs and lows since March 2019, when in-person school and work was cut short for everyone. My highs came when there was something to look forward to, such as a special occasion or taking road trips to nearby cities. The lows struck when I felt like my hard work in school wasn’t paying off, or aimless over the summer with nowhere to venture out, or friends to meet off-screen. Not to mention that the skyrocketing numbers of cases daily in Oakland County alone was paralyzing.

Quarantine also came with countless benefits, like having the time to experiment and try new activities. My small wins included being able to read more, getting back into rollerblading, and diving deeper into my interests in marketing and entrepreneurship. For others, improving their baking skills, getting a pet, or picking up on a new hobby were their small wins. In his talk, Grant mentioned how he and his family started playing Mario Kart which evoked a strong sense of togetherness amidst the desolation they felt away from our friends and loved ones.

Watching Grant’s TED Talk made me feel less dependent and like I could overcome my stagnation, and help others do the same. Even now, as we’re gradually making the transition back to “normal,” the “Mario Kart Theory of Peak Flow” Grant shared can be applied to reclaim our peak flow and feel rejuvenated to conquer all that lies before us.

Mario Kart Theory of Peak Flow

1. **Mastery** - Feeling a sense of progress and accomplishment. Mastery can be developed for something small – for Grant and his family, it was winning a game of Mario Kart. Grant also encourages keeping a “Just did” list to show the small accomplishments of the day-to-day as we tend to focus on what’s left on our to-do lists and underappreciate what’s been done, according to the Zeigarnik Effect. One engineer felt mastery after stacking a [world record-breaking 5 M&Ms!](#)
2. **Mindfulness** - Focusing your full attention on a single task. Don’t confetti-shred your time by constantly being distracted by mindless tasks such as checking email and text messages (I’m very guilty of this!), watching TV while working, and other forms of multitasking. Value and dedicate your energy and attention to engage deeply in

meaningful work for any duration of quiet time you can get – which I realize can be especially difficult as teens with the other commitments we take on. The way to treat these uninterrupted blocks of time like treasures to guard, as Grant calls them, is to place rigid boundaries between your focus and distractions. This may mean placing your phone in another room, deleting the social media apps from your phone, or even asking a sibling or parent to set a passcode on your phone which only they know.

3. **Mattering** - Knowing you make a difference to others. As teens, we can sometimes feel our lives have no impact on others, but it's important to think of the people we've had an impact on, either indirectly or directly. An example of small, but no less meaningful, acts of kindness that leaves a positive impact on others' lives is being a mentor for students just entering high school, or voluntarily shoveling your neighbor's snow. Bigger acts of kindness include donating money to charity or volunteering at a local food pantry. Joining a religious or community group, such as TAB, can also improve your social health by making you feel less alone and more connected with others who are in the same boat. Anything you choose, however big or small, to give to others will mitigate feelings of purposelessness you may have felt being alienated at home over the past three years.