

STUCK IN NEUTRAL: LANGUISHING AND ITS IMPACT ON AUSTRALIA



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**LANGUISHING IS NOT ONLY A SIGNIFICANT RISK FACTOR FOR
FUTURE MENTAL ILLNESS, IT IS A FORM OF SUFFERING IN THE
NOW. IT SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACTS HOW WE BEHAVE IN DAY-TO-DAY
LIFE, THE WAY WE INTERACT WITH THE PEOPLE WE LOVE AND HOW
WELL WE FEEL AND PERFORM AT WORK.**

Dr Joep van Agteren • CEO Be Well Co

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What Is Languishing?

Languishing describes a mental state where people have low levels of mental health, or mental wellbeing. It's different from experiencing a mental illness like anxiety or depression; rather it describes a feeling of being dissatisfied with our life, who we are, and where our life is headed. It is something that many of us struggle with in silence as we don't have the language yet to describe it and can wrongly label it as something clinical, like depression.

Why Does It Matter?

People who are Languishing are more likely to experience a mental or physical illness in the future. But it's more than just a risk factor: it is a form of suffering in the now. Languishing significantly impacts our day-to-day life, our relationships and our productivity at work over and above other problems like depression, anxiety and burnout. It is a state of struggling many of us endure every day, thinking it is normal, when it is not. It's certainly no way to live.

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This Report:

The key focus of this report is to capture the largely invisible issue of Languishing. We have summarised the key results from a collaborative scientific study of more than 16,000 Australian adults. **The key results of this study show the negative impact of Languishing in Australia:**

1

Languishing is more common than we realise

Nearly 20% of our sample are Languishing. They are not clinically distressed, but are struggling nonetheless.

2

It is driven by external and internal influences

People who are Languishing feel disconnected from society and don't feel like they belong. They lack a sense of growth and direction in life.

3

Languishing in Young People

The "Happiness U-Curve" needs to be re-thought, as younger respondents are Languishing more, and for longer.

4

Languishing has real workplace impacts

Languishing is associated with poor work engagement and higher rates of burnout.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Researchers at Be Well Co, together with collaborators at leading research institutes in Australia, have been collecting mental health and wellbeing data from a range of workplace and community samples for over 5 years.

This study aimed to capture states of positive mental health, also known as mental wellbeing, together with states of distress, in order for us to differentiate:

- People struggling with wellbeing and showing symptoms of depression and anxiety, from,
- People only struggling with poor wellbeing.

This allows us to estimate the "pure" rate of Languishing in our convenience sample, independently from distress, determine some of its characteristics, and explore its unique impact on indicators of workplace wellbeing.

Participants were given scientifically validated measures:

- Mental wellbeing was measured using the Mental Health Continuum Short Form¹
- Distress was measured using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale²
- Work wellbeing indicators were based on items from established measures such as the Utrecht Work Wellbeing Scale³

After completion of the survey, participants were given feedback on their scores, alongside resources, enabling them to improve their own wellbeing literacy.

A summary of the data that underpins this report and an overview of its methodology can be found at <https://osf.io/stxy5/>

Our Research Partners

This report is based on the data from a long-term collaborative study with researchers from a range of leading institutes. Find our acknowledgements at the back of the report.



WHAT IS POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH?

Positive mental health is defined as “a personal and subjective experience, where we are content with our lives, feel good, function well, and view ourselves favourably”. Languishing describes a lack of positive mental health, a term that is synonymous with mental wellbeing. Languishing is the opposite of thriving or flourishing.

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WELLBEING IS NOT JUST THE ABSENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS; IT ENCOMPASSES A SENSE OF FLOURISHING THAT INVOLVES EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL WELLBEING.

Professor Corey Keyes

”

Our level of mental wellbeing varies over time and is influenced by the way we adapt to problems and opportunities we face. It’s also impacted by many factors such as our environment, life experiences, cultural background, biology, and unique behaviours. Many people have some level of mental wellbeing, however, it can be improved by taking action through a variety of tools and strategies, even when we are experiencing a mental health condition.” ⁴



WHAT IS LANGUISHING?

"Languishing" is a technical term used to describe the experience of low mental wellbeing. People who feel this way may struggle to feel positive about their life, feel stuck or stagnant, and are often described as feeling 'not quite right' and lacking the same joy they once had.

While Languishing people may feel a general lack of mental wellbeing, they do not experience a mental illness such as depression or anxiety. Despite the lack of symptoms of a clinical condition, it is a state where people struggle mentally, and are at risk of developing a future mental illness. Languishing can be measured using a range of generally accepted 'symptoms', for example, lacking purpose, optimism, positive relationships, autonomy and/or a sense of calm and connection.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Organisational Psychologist Adam Grant wrote a piece on Languishing in the New York Times, describing it as the feeling of 'blah'. That article was the most read article of the NYT in 2021.

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LANGUISHING IS A SENSE OF STAGNATION AND EMPTINESS. IT FEELS AS IF YOU'RE MUDDLING THROUGH YOUR DAYS, LOOKING AT YOUR LIFE THROUGH A FOGGY WINDSHIELD.

Professor Adam Grant

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“

**THESE PEOPLE ARE SUFFERING IN SILENCE WHILE
TELLING THEMSELVES THAT HOW THEY FEEL IS
NORMAL. IT'S NOT. I WOULD NOT WANT TO FEEL
JOYLESS OR STUCK AND I DON'T WANT MY FAMILY OR
FRIENDS TO FEEL LIKE THAT EITHER.**

Dr Joep van Agteren • CEO Be Well Co

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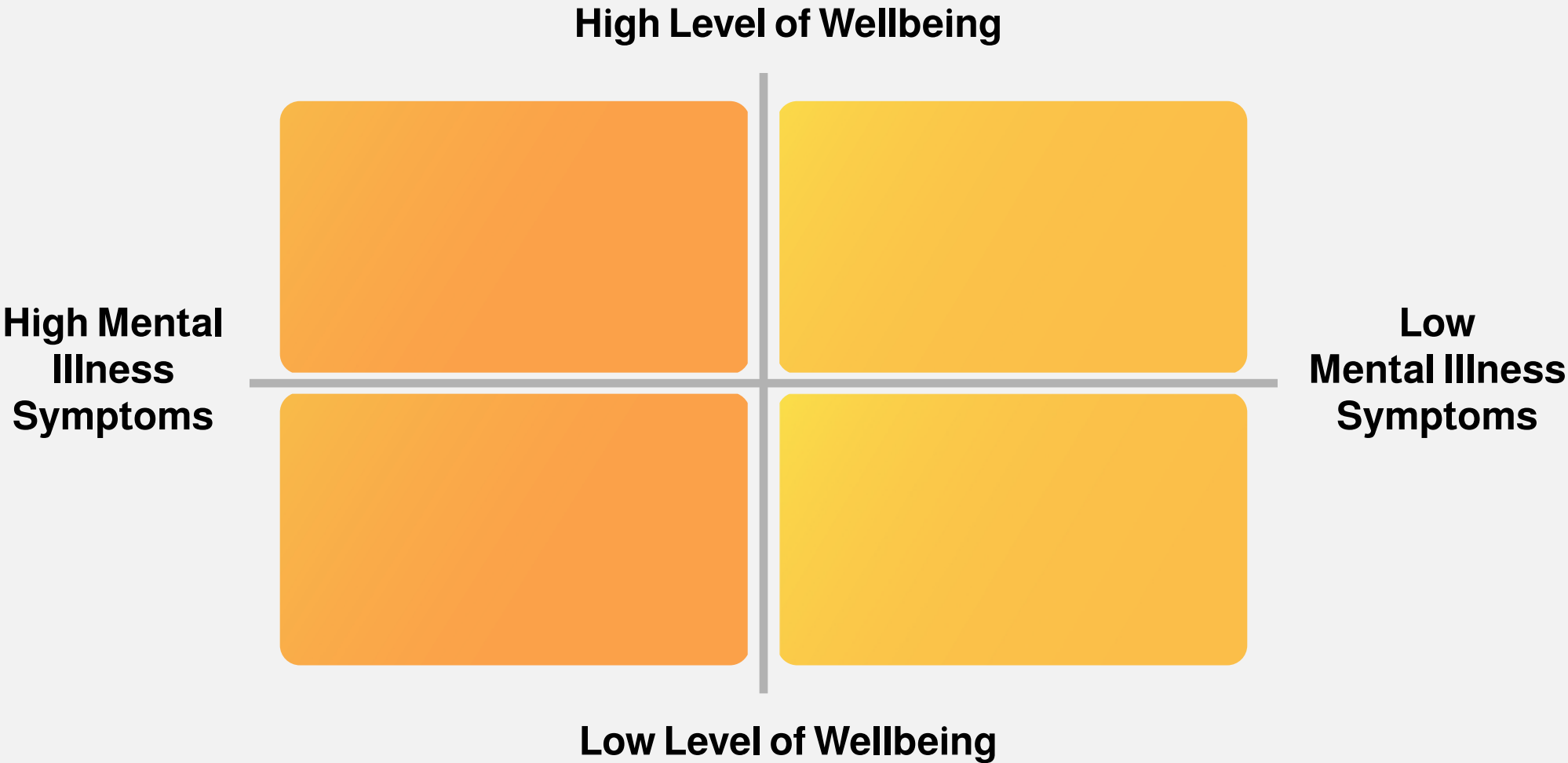
HOW IS MENTAL WELLBEING RELATED TO MENTAL ILLNESS?

This report follows up-to-date scientific evidence suggesting that mental illness and mental wellbeing should be seen as *two* related, yet distinct, concepts⁵. This means that an individual can experience wellbeing, with or without experiencing mental illness symptoms (see diagram to the right).

This way of viewing mental health opposes the common view of the ‘mental health spectrum’ that suggests mental wellbeing and mental illness are opposites of each other, implying that people sit somewhere between flourishing and mental illness.

The dual continua model of mental health

People can experience mental illness and wellbeing together or apart, meaning we can group people into four quadrants.



- Our traditional way of thinking about mental health focuses on moving people from the left to the right. Responding to or preventing symptoms of illness.
- Be Well Co and others working in wellbeing science, focus on the need and importance of moving people up the vertical axis, from experiencing low to high wellbeing, whether you have a mental health condition or not.

Think of someone who may be experiencing anxiety symptoms such as excessive worrying or being irritable. Does it mean that someone like that cannot experience states of wellbeing such as a sense of purpose, positive relationships, or a sense of autonomy? If you treat mental health as operating on one spectrum, these two sides cannot occur together. To us, and much of the research⁵ and lived experience, that doesn't make intuitive sense, and is routinely contradicted by scientific studies. This is not a very empowering view for people with a mental health condition.

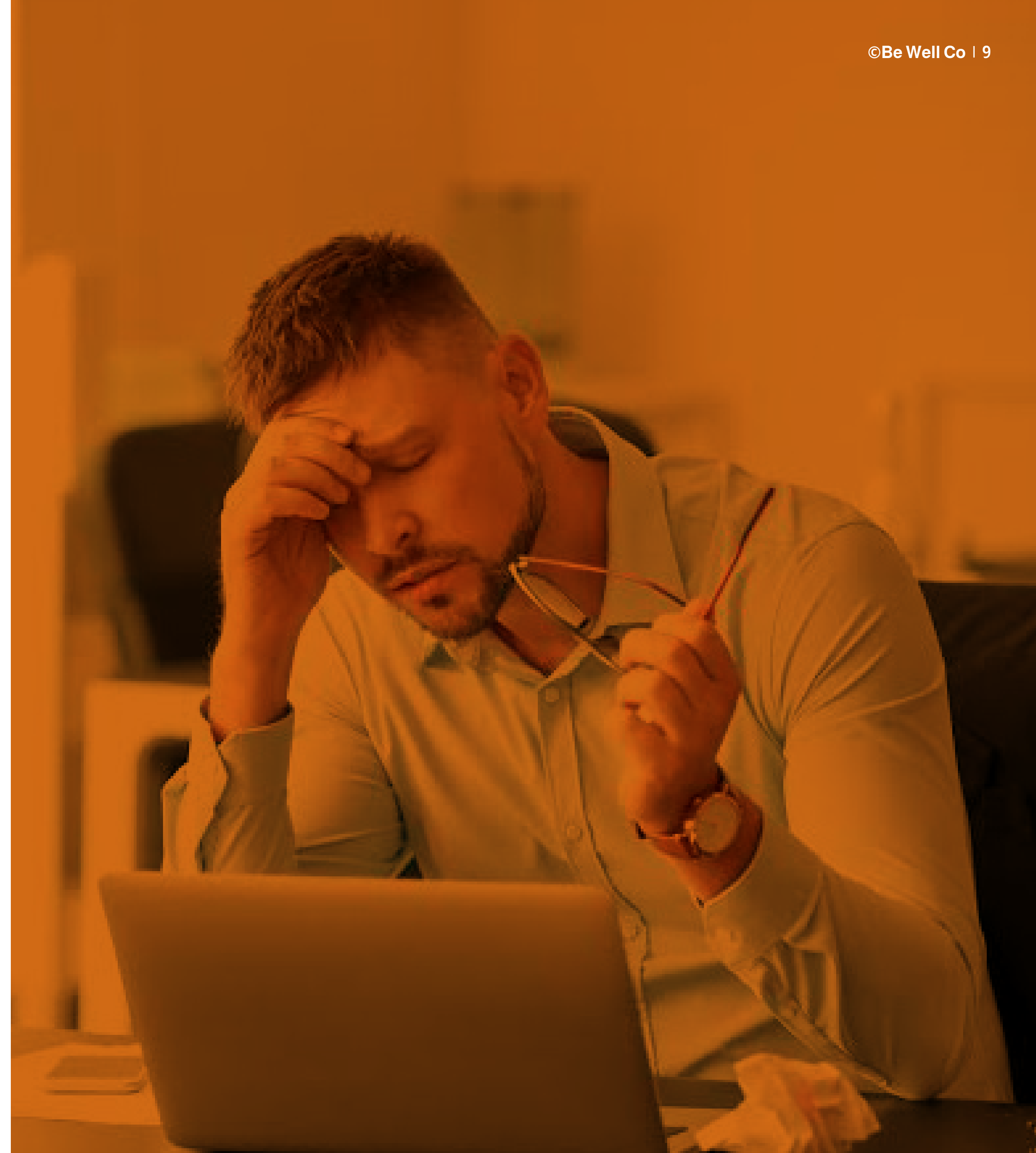
It would be more helpful to see mental health in the same way we think of physical health. We have physical health conditions such as heart disease and cancer, and we have indicators of physical fitness. Both can co-occur and both need different ways to measure and improve them.

“

THE ABSENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN THE PRESENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH. MENTAL HEALTH IS A SEPARATE DIMENSION FROM MENTAL ILLNESS.

The term Languishing was coined by Sociologist Professor Corey Keyes in 2002.

”



THE FACES OF LANGUISHING

This report is about the data behind Languishing, but it’s important that the experience of Languishing comes to life so that we feel the weight of the problem.

While the key focus of this report is to provide you with scientific data on the occurrence and impact of Languishing in an Australian sample, providing data alone is generally not sufficient to change policy and practice, or to gain widespread awareness of an issue.

“
ONE OF THE THINGS THAT MAKES IT EASY FOR SOMEONE TO REALISE THEY HAVE SOMETHING THAT THEY NEED TO CHANGE, IS TO GIVE IT A NAME, A LABEL.

Dr Joep van Agteren • CEO Be Well Co

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As a result, Be Well Co has created a video series called ‘[The Faces of Languishing](#)’ to show what it looks like to Languish. Real human stories that show different people going through the same thing in their unique way. Real humans who were surprised to hear about the stats. Real humans who had to find their own ways of dealing with feeling "not quite right", as they didn’t know how to go about making positive changes.



THOMAS

“
LANGUISHING FELT LIKE LOSING MY IDENTITY. I WAS KIND OF FLOATING THROUGH LIFE ... I WASN'T SICK BUT I WASN'T WELL.
”

Watch Video



JOANNE

“
I DIDN'T HAVE THE LANGUAGE FOR HOW I WAS FEELING. IT WASN'T DEPRESSION. I WAS STILL FUNCTIONING BUT I FELL INTO THIS PERIOD OF LISTLESSNESS.
”

Watch Video



LUKE

“
I FELT I WAS COMPLETELY ALONE. THAT THIS WAS AN ISOLATED CASE. I FELT TRAPPED. I KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG BUT I JUST DIDN'T FEEL LIKE IT WAS DEEP ENOUGH TO BRING IT UP.
”

Watch Video



TARA

“
I COULD ONLY GET THROUGH THE DAY AND WHAT I HAD TO DO WITH THE KIDS. I COULDN'T PLAN AHEAD. I LOST MY SPARK. I FELT FLAT AND LIKE I LOST MY PURPOSE
”

Watch Video



ENZA

“
I LOST MY SPARK AND ALL MY GUSTO WAS GONE. I FELT LOST. I FELT EMPTY. I HAD NO SENSE OF PURPOSE.
”

Watch Video

WHY FOCUS ON LANGUISHING?

A shift towards prevention

There are many mental, physical, social, and material benefits of experiencing states of mental wellbeing. The area of flourishing is well-documented and studied: we have whole industries for them. However, by focusing on promoting wellbeing, we may have neglected what impact it has when we don't have it. This is a problem as there are clear immediate risks associated with Languishing. See the boxes on the right for some of the data research points us to.

“

BY FOCUSING ON DRIVERS OF LANGUISHING, SUCH AS PURPOSE, BELONGING, FUN, AUTONOMY, WE NOT ONLY MAKE PEOPLE FEEL BETTER IN THE MOMENT, BUT WE'VE ALSO CREATED A POSITIVE OPPORTUNITY FOR PREVENTION, WITHOUT MAKING IT ABOUT ILLNESS OR DEFICIENCIES.

Dr Matthew Iasiello • Be Well Co

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Risk of illness

Languishing people can be up to 8x more likely to develop a mental illness than someone who is flourishing⁶.

 [CLICK TO SEE RESEARCH LINKS](#)



Affecting new mums

Languishing during the post-partum period is associated with being 6x more likely to feel lonely and 2x more likely to feel anxiety and depression⁷.

 [CLICK TO SEE RESEARCH LINKS](#)



Impacting health costs

Each point increase in mental wellbeing for each person was associated with US\$43 (AUD\$69) less in healthcare costs, which adds up significantly on a population level⁸.

 [CLICK TO SEE RESEARCH LINKS](#)



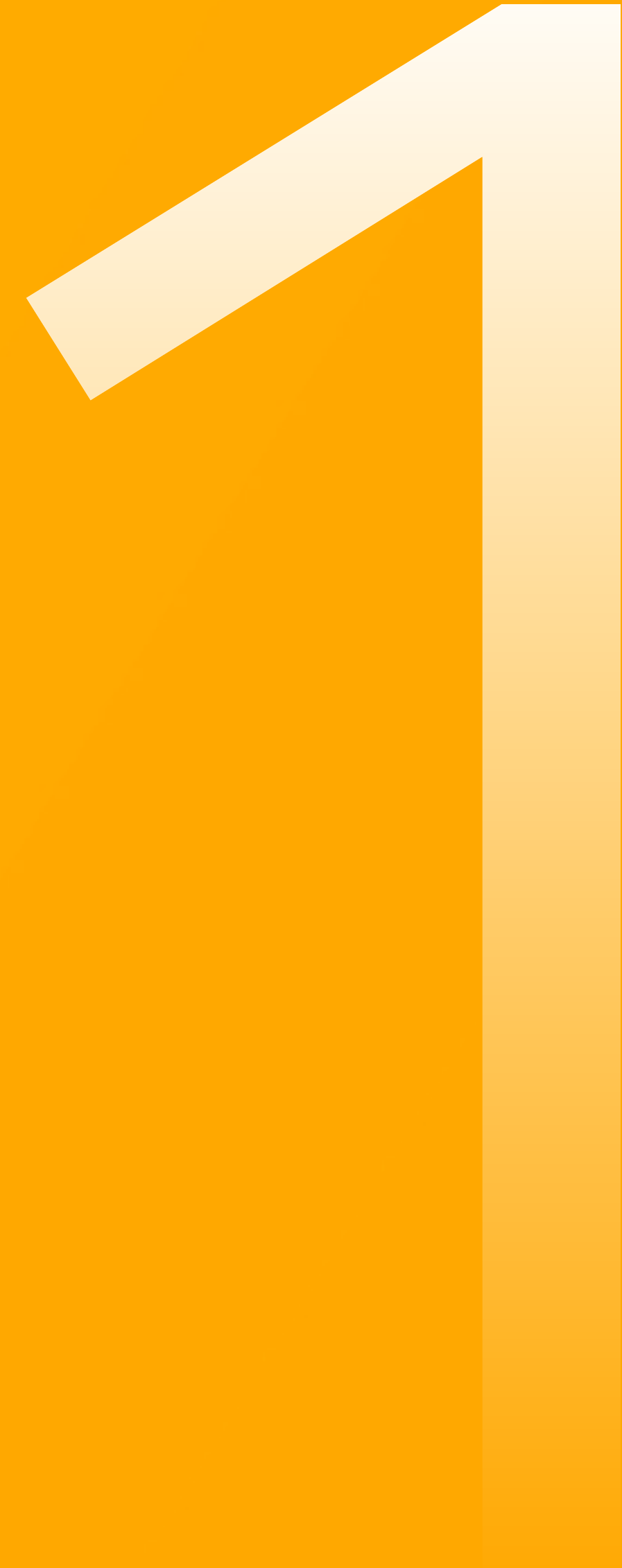
Impacting our productivity

Low wellbeing costs approximately AUD\$3,770 per year per staff member, contributing to the more than AUD\$43 billion yearly costs in lost productivity^{9,10}.

 [CLICK TO SEE RESEARCH LINKS](#)

LANGUISHING AFFECTS 1 IN 5 PEOPLE WHO ARE SILENTLY STRUGGLING

In our study, 19.9% of our sample (3,295 out of 16,569 people) were purely Languishing: they don't have symptoms of distress but struggle with poor mental wellbeing.



“
**OUR FINDINGS SHOW THAT LANGUISHING IS FUELLED
BY LOW SOCIAL WELLBEING, A LACK OF BELONGING,
NOT HAVING A DIRECTION IN LIFE, OR FEELING A SENSE
OF GROWTH. THAT SHOULD BE A CONCERN FOR ANYONE
WITH AN INTEREST IN MENTAL HEALTH.**

Dr Matthew Iasiello • Be Well Co

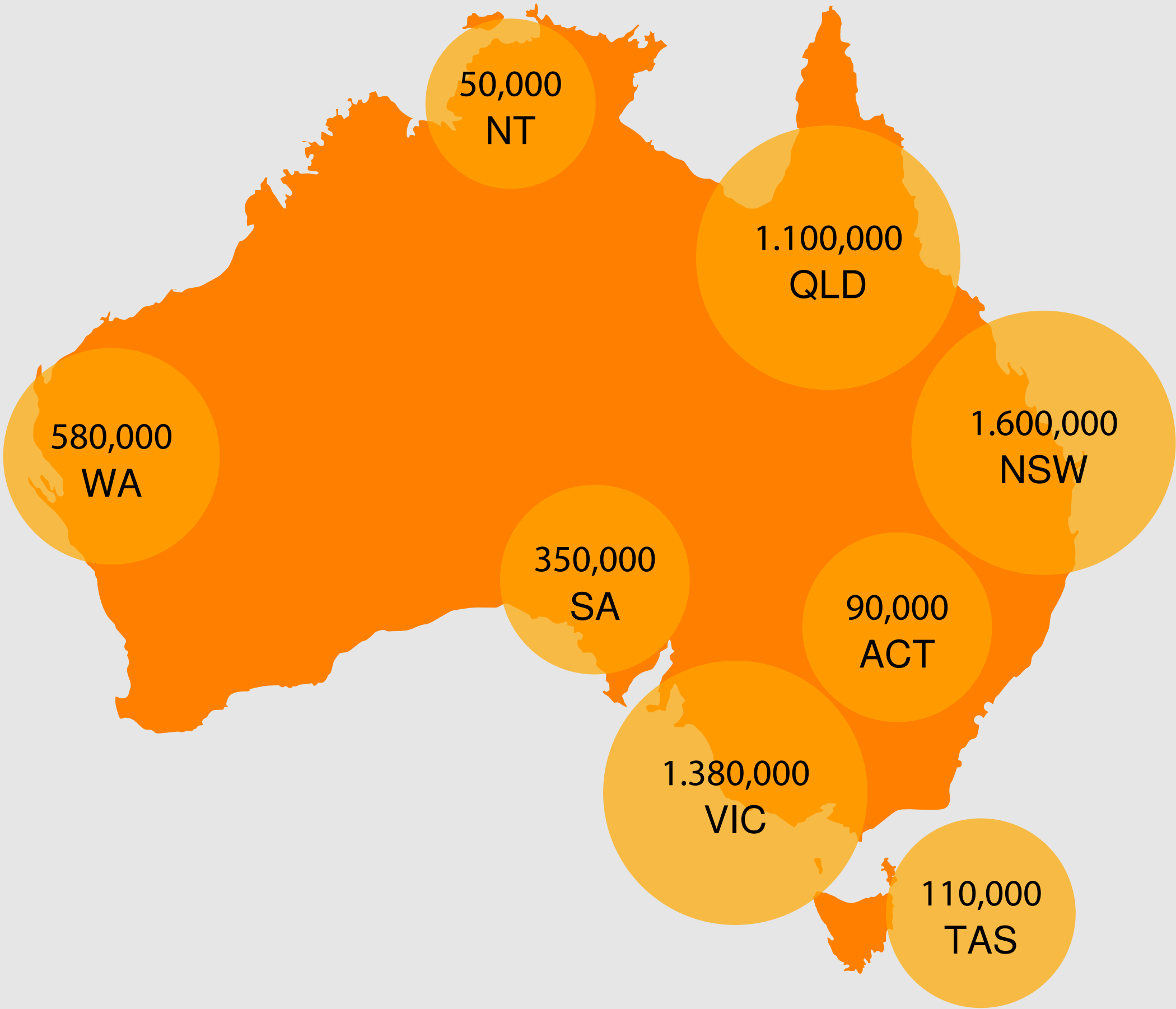
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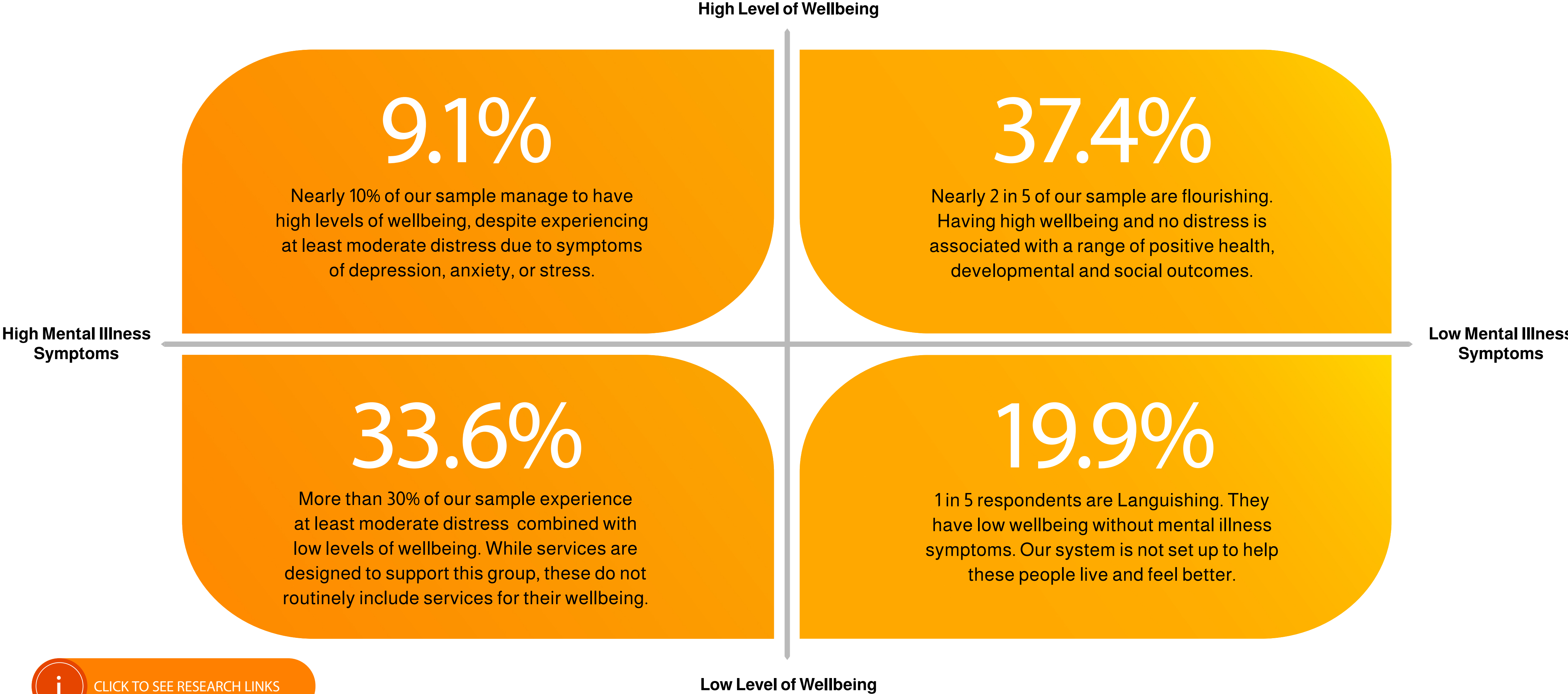
WHAT DOES 1 IN 5 LANGUISHERS MEAN FOR YOUR STATE?

19.9% of people in our sample experience Languishing. That translates to a large proportion of the Australian population. To make this come alive we created the visual on the right, showing how many Australians this could translate to per state.

53.5% of participants (8,863 people) had poor mental wellbeing.

19.9% of participants (3,295 people) languished. They had poor wellbeing but were not showing symptoms of distress.





 [CLICK TO SEE RESEARCH LINKS](#)

LANGUISHING IS AFFECTED BY MANY DRIVERS

What causes someone to Languish differs from person to person, but our data gives us clear insights on the main themes: low social wellbeing, lacking purpose and direction. Languishers experience less development and growth as a person.



LANGUISHING IS AFFECTED BY MANY DRIVERS

SOCIAL WELLBEING

Belonging & Connecting with your society is important for overall wellbeing & happiness.

5x

Languishers are 5x more likely to report that they never feel: that society is a good place, that society makes sense to them, or that they feel they belong to a community.

PURPOSE

Feeling purpose is a cornerstone to giving your life a sense of direction & the feeling of being valued.

1 in 11

Nearly 10% of Languishers feel they lack clear purpose, i.e. they do not experience much positive direction in their life.

GROWTH

Growth is key for all individuals, building skills and confidence necessary to navigate life.

2.5x

Languishers are 2.5x more likely to find it challenging to grow, develop themselves and become a better person.

DRIVERS OF WELLBEING

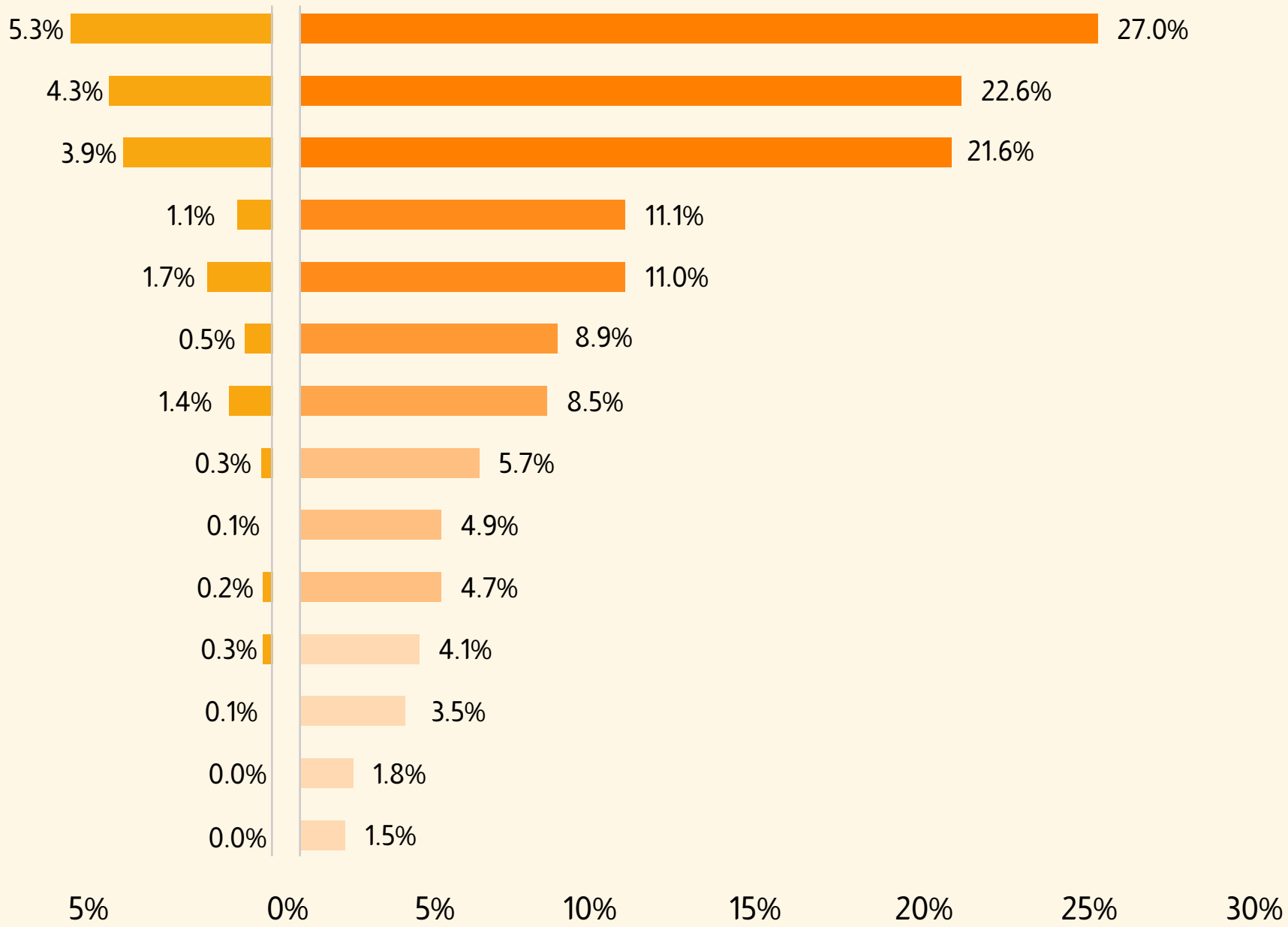
We asked respondents questions from one of the world’s most widely validated wellbeing measurement tool, the MHC-SF, which we used to inform our results.

This chart shows the percentage of participants without distress who reported NEVER or RARELY experiencing the drivers of wellbeing (the statements presented on the left side of the figure).

Drivers of mental wellbeing

- I believe society is a good place, or is becoming a better place, for all people
- The way our society works makes sense to me
- I belong to a community (like a social group, or your neighbourhood)
- I have something important to contribute to society
- I believe people are basically good
- My life has a sense of direction or meaning to it
- I have experiences that challenge me to grow and become a better person
- I am confident to express my own ideas and opinions
- I am satisfied with life
- I like most parts of my personality
- I am good at managing the responsibilities of my daily life
- I have warm and trusting relationships with others
- I feel happy
- I am interested in life

Flourishers Languishers



YOUNG ADULTS ARE RESHAPING THE HAPPINESS CURVE

Happiness is often thought of to behave in a U-shape, but our data – in line with other recent studies – suggests that this may be less so in Australia. This change in trend is driven by lower than expected wellbeing in young respondents.

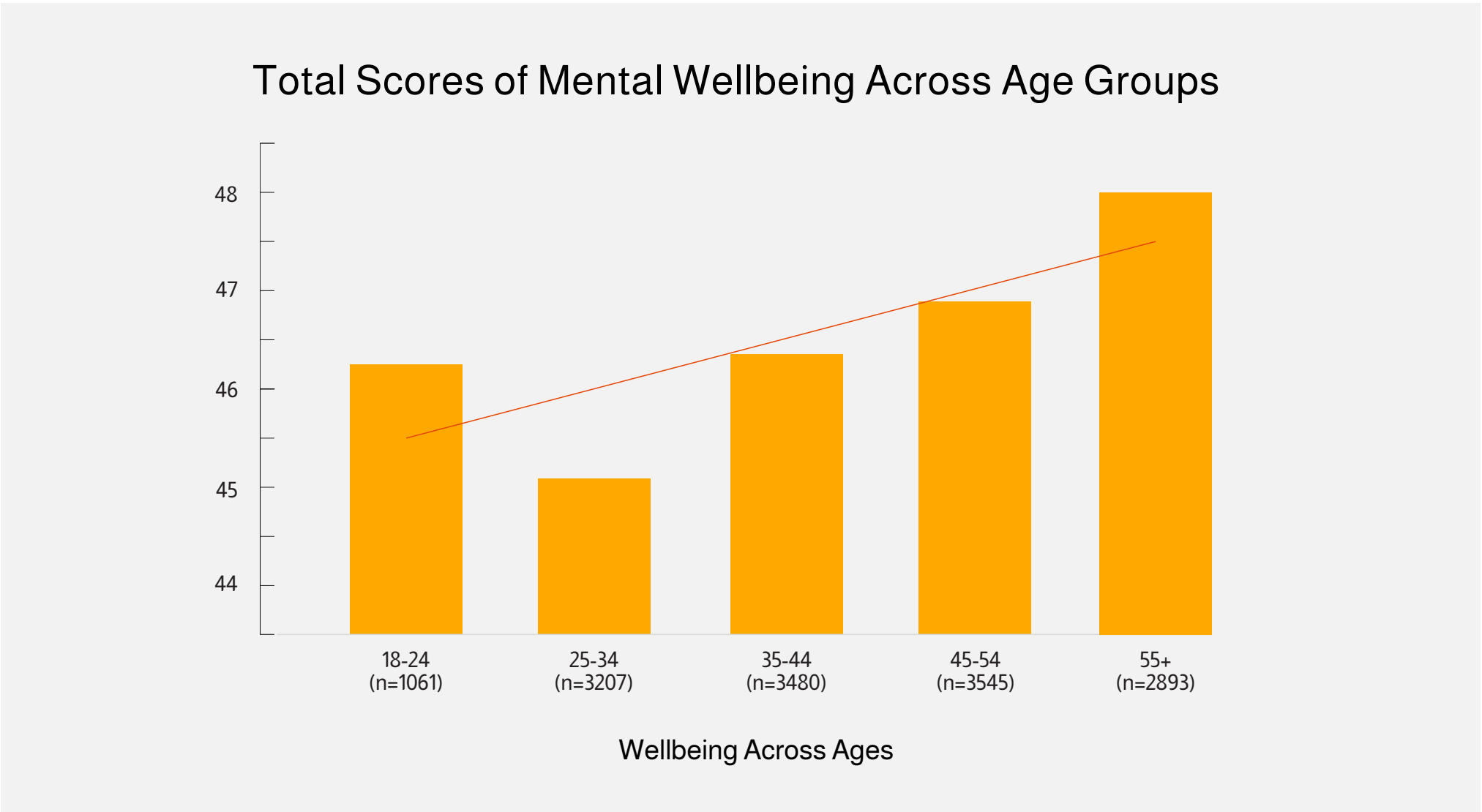
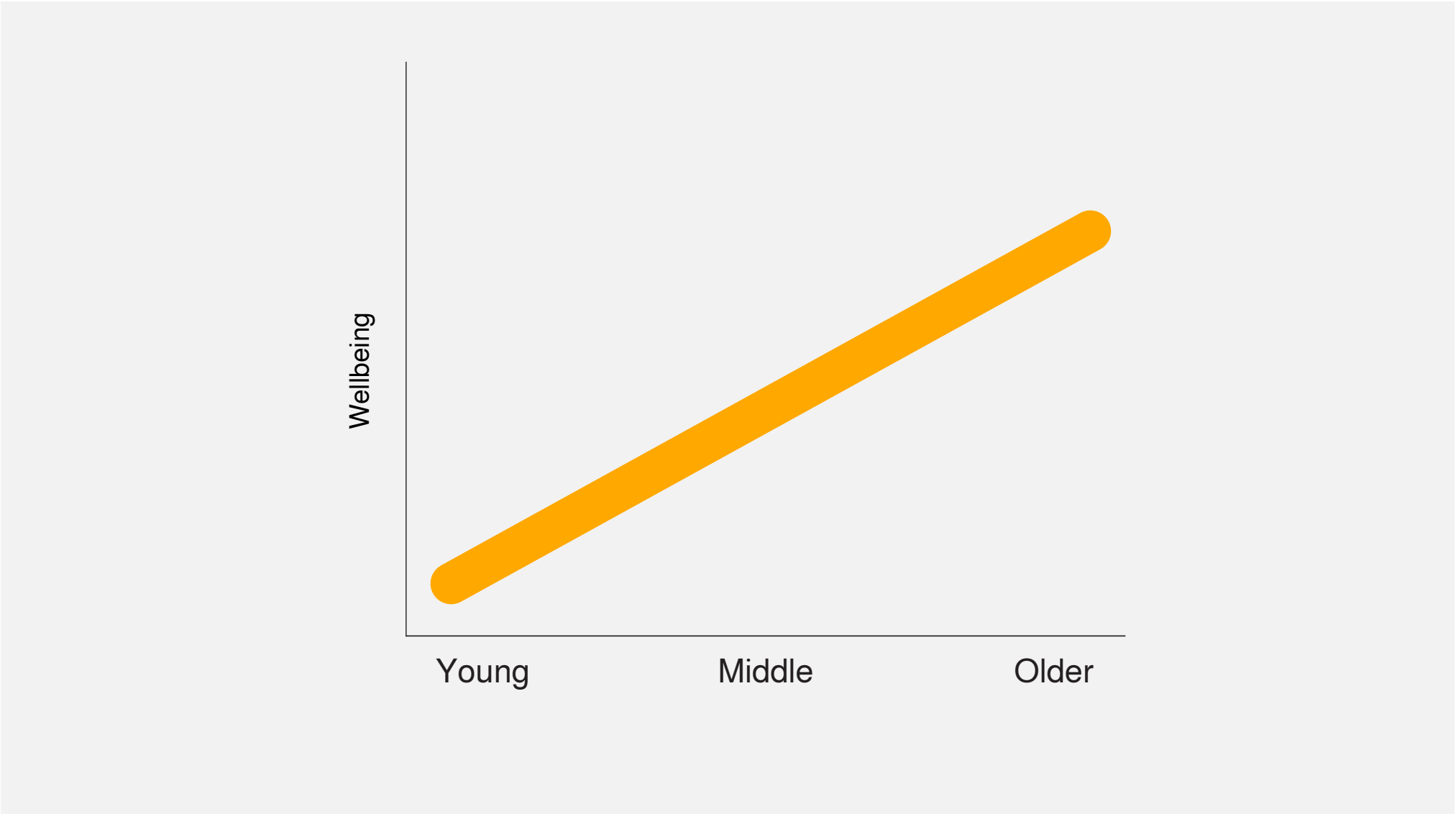


OUR DATA GOES AGAINST COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF WELLBEING ACROSS AGES

The idea of the "U-shaped curve" of happiness is pervasive. This idea suggests that wellbeing decreases from early adulthood to middle age, hitting a low around 40, then increases into old age. This pattern, often thought to be observed across cultures, is supposed to reflect life stages: career and family pressures causing a dip happiness in mid-life, while later years bring less stress and more life satisfaction.

International researchers have noticed that the U-shaped curve is no longer being observed as a result of the wellbeing of younger adults dipping lower than previous years ^{11, 12}. Our findings support this pattern, which points to a cause for concern.

 [CLICK TO SEE RESEARCH LINKS](#)



LANGUISHING IS SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTING WORKPLACES

Workplaces need to pay attention to Languishing because our data suggests that people who Languish struggle with work engagement, are less productive, and experience burnout more often.



LANGUISHING AT WORK... WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

People who Languish in their personal life take this state into the workplace. This ultimately leads to decreased productivity, lower engagement, and less innovation. Languishing employees feel stagnant, which can lead to lower morale, increased staff turnover, and creates a negative work environment. Languishing not only affects individual performance and team dynamics; it also inhibits overall organisational health, and stifles growth.

Our report shows that work engagement is particularly impacted by Languishing. It is the difference between whether someone is enthusiastic about the work they are doing, have the energy and focus to do their job well, and to be successful.

Work wellbeing is a synergy of personal and environmental elements. Our report, in addition to a significant body of research, makes the case for organisations to invest in creating a work environment that promotes mental health¹³. However, a point of caution: defaulting to only thinking about workplace risk factors is not going to solve Languishing. Languishing is affected by a range of influences beyond the workplace, and benefits from a view that tackles both generic and organisational factors.

“

THE IMPACT OF LANGUISHING EXTENDS TO WORKPLACES, AS IT FEEDS INTO DECREASED PRODUCTIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT, AND CONTRIBUTES TO A NEGATIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT AND SIGNIFICANT FINANCIAL COSTS.

Dr. Matthew Iasiello • Be Well Co

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LANGUISHING AT WORK... WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

ENERGY AT WORK

21%

of Languishers never or rarely felt they were filled with energy when they were at work, compared with 8% of flourishers.

WORK ENTHUSIASM

13%

of Languishers never or rarely feel enthusiasm for the work they do, compared with 5% of flourishers.

WORK IMMERSION

14%

of Languishers rarely or never felt immersed in their work, compared with 6.7% of flourishers.

WORK RELATIONSHIPS

5%

of Languishers are unsatisfied with work relationships, compared with 1% of flourishers.

JOB SATISFACTION

5%

of Languishers are unsatisfied with their job in general, compared with 1% of flourishers.

BURNOUT

2x

are 2x as likely to experience burnout compared to flourishers.

“

**EVERYONE IS LOOKING FOR WAYS TO HELP THE
WORSENING MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN THIS COUNTRY,
YET WE'VE MISSED AN OBVIOUS SOLUTION. ADDRESSING
LANGUISHING AS AN EARLY WARNING SIGN, AND
CATCHING IT BEFORE IT MORPHS INTO MENTAL ILLNESS,
PROVIDES AN INCREDIBLE OPPORTUNITY TO HELP FIX THE
PROBLEM EARLY, OR AT LEAST VASTLY IMPROVE IT.**

Dr Joep van Agteren • CEO Be Well Co

”

LANGUISHING: HOW TO SOLVE IT?

I am an individual

There is a plethora of research out there to give people tools to improve when they Languish¹⁴. Our researchers worked together with Beyond Blue and created the practice-friendly “guide to what works for mental wellbeing”¹⁵. In it we summarise the existing literature on a range of initiatives you can explore that will be readily offered by local council, state governments and mental health NGO’s. Use the button to navigate to the resource for more information. Want to receive Languishing specific content? You can [join our community here](#) to stay connected with us.



Click the link below to access the what works for mental wellbeing guide our researchers wrote with Beyond Blue.

 [CLICK TO GET THE GUIDE](#)

Are you an organisation needing help with your own research on mental health and (workplace) wellbeing? [Go to our website](#) to see how we can help you.



LANGUISHING: HOW TO SOLVE IT?

I am an organisation

As an organisation, you can think of tackling Languishing in two ways:

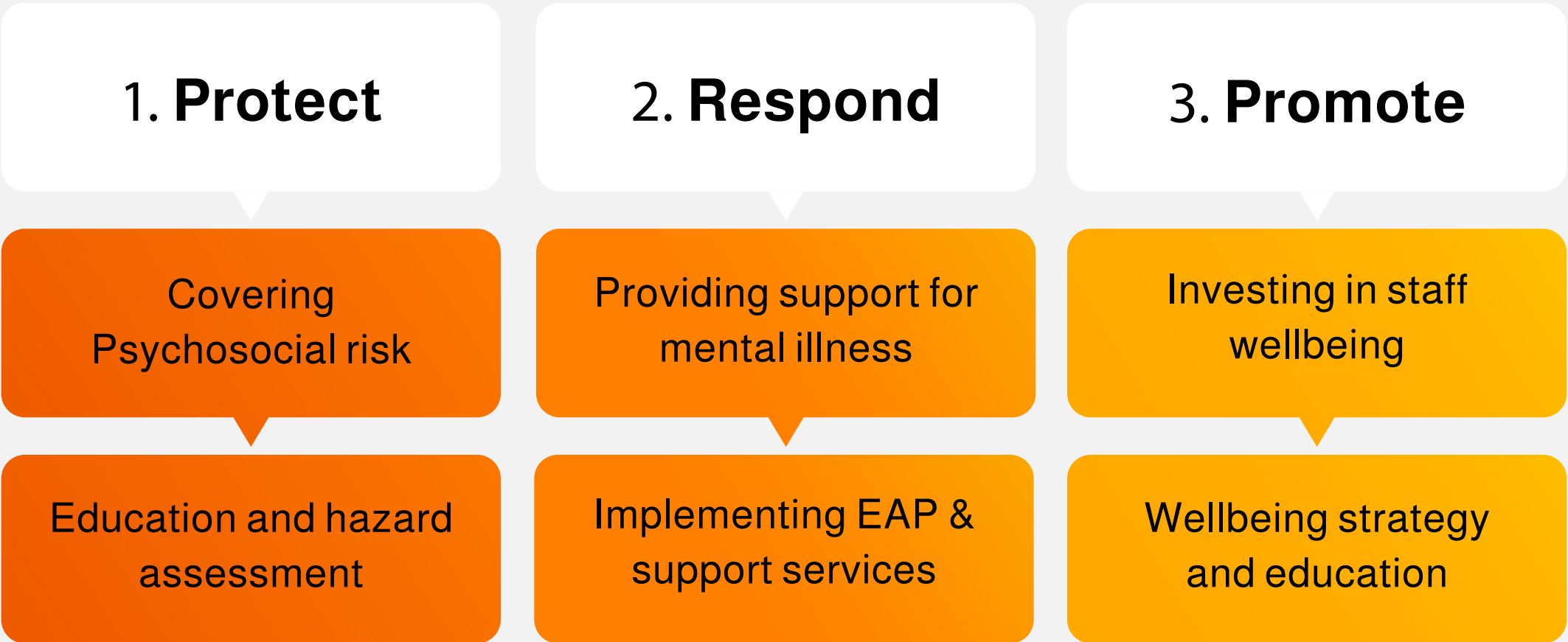
1.

What can I do to shape my workplace and workplace behaviours (ie what workplace strategies do I consider)?
2.

What can I do to help people navigate their personal situation (ie what strategies do I offer to help people work on their general mental health)?

We recommend you use the Protect, Respond, Promote framework¹²

Organisations and businesses have come a long way to improve what they do to protect and respond to risk in the workplace. Promoting workplace wellbeing is the complementary and much needed piece to that puzzle. Learn more about the Protect, Respond, Promote framework on the [Mentally healthy Workplaces website](#) or get in touch with us below.



Want to know more?

Talk to us to and find out how [Be Well Co](#) can help in each of these areas for your organisation.

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