



Expert Insights: The COVID-19 pandemic is over but we still feel miserable. What now?

J. DAVID CRESWELL

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The COVID-19 pandemic has officially ended, but life still feels hard. Rates of depression and anxiety were high before the pandemic, they [increased](#) during it, and they continue to [stay high](#) post-pandemic.

Our social lives are suffering, too, even prompting Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to put out a [national advisory](#) last month on the surging epidemic of loneliness and social isolation.

EXPERT INSIGHTS

J. David
Creswell,
Ph.D.
Associate
Professor,
Psychology,
CMU



Many of us have trouble knowing how to talk about how life feels hard, that something feels off, or that we don't feel as happy as we could be. So how do we find some relief? As we stare ahead at our first post-pandemic, it feels like a chance for a major reboot on living.

For most of us, a reboot means things like planning a summer vacation, committing to a healthy diet, starting a hobby or exercise routine, or focusing on close relationships. These are important and helpful approaches. Planning a fun summer family vacation or starting to play pickleball can displace some of the misery we are feeling.

But these strategies are often aimed at steering around the misery by replacing it with something more rewarding. We run the risk of our misery sitting in some latent form only to re-emerge again after the summer is over or, worse, just hanging around much like a case of long COVID.

There is another approach. Instead of steering around the misery, we can turn toward it and systematically examine it with an open mind.

It's a path less traveled and certainly has more short-term discomforts (by design), but it holds the potential to address the root causes and sources of what makes us miserable in the first place.

There are a range of ways to walk this path, such as [psychotherapy](#), [expressive writing](#) in a journal or a [mindfulness meditation](#) app. There are real actionable ways to get started, like searching for a [licensed therapist](#) or reading a [book](#) on how to do expressive writing.

Scientists are still trying to figure out how these practices that encourage us to turn toward our misery work, but we've made some important discoveries.

First, just the act of putting negative feelings into words helps transform them, [cooling off emotional brain circuits](#) and [reducing distress](#). Scientists call this “affect labeling,” and psychotherapy and expressive writing are wonderful ways to start turning toward discomfort and putting uncomfortable feelings into words.

Once a negative feeling is named and acknowledged, it creates some mental space so we can examine it in an open and curious way, and its emotional grip on us loosens.

Second, these practices help us become less judgmental. A recent [study](#) showed that if we habitually judge our negative emotions to be bad, this habit of judging may be the critical factor for driving worsening depression and anxiety.

Practices like psychotherapy and mindfulness meditation help support a more accepting and non-judgmental attitude toward our misery, breaking us free to work with these feelings so that we can transform them.

For example, a good therapist in psychotherapy can help us examine our misery without judgment, seeing the root causes. Similarly, mindfulness meditation training programs emphasize an open and non-judgmental attitude toward moment-to-moment experience.

Clinical trials from my lab have shown that when we offer mindfulness meditation programs that emphasize an open and accepting attitude, we see significant reductions in feelings of [loneliness](#), [stress reactions](#) and improvements in emotional well-being.

Third, practices like psychotherapy, expressive writing or mindfulness meditation require some regular and sustained action.

[Reviews](#) of expressive writing show, for example, that at least 15 minutes of journaling is needed for positive health benefits, and that more writing sessions are associated with larger reductions in depression. We see similar trends in our clinical trials of mindfulness meditation training: Three or four guided sessions don't help much for stress reduction, whereas [14 smartphone training sessions](#) really start to transform stress and well-being.

These practices — of turning toward our misery in an open and curious way — give our brains a chance to rework negative feelings. The scientific term

for this is memory [reconsolidation](#), and the basic idea is that if we can introduce new information to our emotional memories, these memories can then get reorganized into something less threatening.

When people engage in regular psychotherapy or expressive writing, they can systematically introduce new ways of thinking to how they hold and understand their feelings, reshaping them into something new. [Health psychologists](#) have a different term for it: They call it a new discovery of meaning.

The start of summer can be an opportunity for a fresh start to living. There are a lot of approaches, and picking one doesn't mean we can't try others, too. But maybe now is the right time to try finding relief in the place where we might least expect it, turning our attention to the misery itself.

Feeling like you are in crisis and need to talk to someone right now? Call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988, which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

J. David Creswell, Ph.D., is the William Dietrich II Chair Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Carnegie Mellon University, and the CEO of Equa Health. His Health and Human Performance Laboratory studies what makes people resilient under stress, the science of mindfulness meditation training, and wellness.

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