

The New Language Needed to Connect Professionally Right Now

Stop horking and take a moment to panhale.

By Betsy Miller
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Work meetings begin with a familiar exchange of pleasantries. The ritual is deeply ingrained in our culture, like a reflex.

“How are you?”

Once a question that provoked a benign response, this greeting now feels unsuitable and fraught. The traditional answer—“I’m good. And you?”—escapes from our lips before we can stop it. We convey an inaccurate state of normality out of habit and a desire for familiarity. A professional greeting is not the time to expound upon ambivalence about home-schooling, the psychological strain of extended quarantine, or even the silver linings of spending more time with family. But responding with, “I’m good,” doesn’t cut the mustard.

What we need are succinct answers to capture the complex overlap of our professional and personal experiences right now. We should not have to choose between fast-but-ineffectual reflexes and accurate-but-too-detailed reflections.

The language of business salutations can evolve to capture the current zeitgeist—with compassion, precision, brevity and a touch of much-needed levity. So the next time someone reflexively asks, “How are you?” perhaps one of these options can express how you really are.



It’s a challenge to be horking all the time.

Horking: (Home + Working). Where boundaries between home and office have disappeared; inefficiently working while home-schooling, cooking dinner, and walking the dog. Not to be confused with the Urban Dictionary’s alternative definitions.

I am so fruxious.

Fruxious: (Frustrated + Anxious). A pandemic and election-induced state of frustration and anxiety, experienced most potently in the professional and parenting domains.

Overall, I feel exhaustituted.

Exhaustituted: (Exhaustion + Gratitude). A state of depletion that, nevertheless, leaves room for noticing the silver linings of horking.

I am bewilderedged.

Bewilderaged: (Bewildered + Enraged). Confusion about how things could have spiraled this far, interspersed with moments of micro-rage.

I panhaled for 30 minutes this morning and then felt ready to start the day.

Panhale: (Panic + Exhale). The duality of full-blown pandemic- or election-based panic while also remembering to take a deep breath and calm down.

Being COV-fined is wearing on me.

COV-fined: (COVID + Confined). The mental and physical experience of being confined at home because of COVID.

I could use a resilipep before we get started.

Resilipep: (Resilience + Pep Talk). Occurs when internal resilience is not an available state of mind without external intervention from a third party, such as a pep talk.

And ... for those moments when you forecast an imminent failure of the prefrontal cortex and must warn your colleague or spouse of your unbalanced state:

I am FULL LIMBIC. Let's talk later.

Full limbic: Not a word combination. Rather, the physical and mental state wherein executive function is completely lost, and yet self-awareness remains to warn individuals in the full limbic's immediate proximity that flight-or-fight mode from the lizard brain has taken over.

The evolution of language is a paradox. Meaning creates language, and language creates meaning. If

we had no word for "tree," it would take too long to describe and identify the tall brown thing with green stuff sprouting from the skinnier sticks. In our culture, professional salutations can't be that inefficient, but nor should we sacrifice the psychological benefit of ritual moments of connection.

The purpose of an authentic greeting-and-response is to capture key data about the other person's state-of-being first, and then transition to the substantive meeting topics. In this time of unprecedented social isolation, genuine connection is more important than ever. Because the circumstances we face are so serious, it's not a bad thing to approach this linguistic challenge with a little lightness, lest we all decombobudulge.

Decombobudulge: (Decompensate + Discombobulate + Indulge). A dangerous combination of mental decompensation while experiencing intense discombobulation, often resulting in over-indulgence of chocolate to make it all go away.

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