

Ten Common Feelings During Quarantine

For most of us in academic field in Lebanon, the least that can be said about this academic year is that it has been extremely unusual. As a college counselor, in almost every therapy session with students that I've had since the revolution and now the coronavirus quarantine upended our lives, I've heard or read some iteration of "I don't even know what I'm feeling. It's like 3 million different things at the same time." Ever since October 17, every week has brought so much baggage and news that it felt like a year. In one week we went from being hopeful to hopeless, feeling a part of something bigger to being lonely and isolated, to worrying about schoolwork, and our academic future, feeling stressed about health and family, not to mention the utter desperation of the financial situation and the collapse of the economic system in the country.

Regardless of our current state of mind and feelings, doubts that crept up with most people I've talked to in the past few months were "Is it normal that I feel X?", "Am I a weak person for feeling Y?" My response to these questions is that not only are feelings perfectly valid, but that many people have felt them at some point or other since October. Though knowing your feelings are valid and common might not solve your problem, it does provide some comfort to know that others are experiencing the same emotional ebb and flow. For those of you who have not had the chance or opportunity to seek counseling or those who feel too self-conscious discussing their emotional experiences with a professional, here are ten of the most common feelings that I've heard about from other students during this period.

1. You're relatively calm

After chatting with your friends and seeing how they're extremely worried and anxious about schoolwork, health, and finances, you might feel weird because you're feeling pretty okay. Don't be surprised. A sense of calm is actually quite a common reaction, and no this is not due to denial as your psychology major friends insist. Of course, that is possible, but, for many people it might very well be that they are better equipped to deal with this crisis than they had anticipated. For one, you may be one of those who went through therapy for anxiety-related concerns and learned skills that are coming in handy to help you feel calm. Even if you did not go to therapy, past life experience may have taught you certain skills that allow you to remain calm in a crisis. Believe it or not, being resilient, which is the ability to withstand and cope with adversity, can stem from the feeling that you've been through worse. Many of my students who have gone through adverse childhood experiences and have become accustomed to unstable environments fall into this category. Not to mention that for most of us who have not been outside our homes for a month, there is now a sense of safety and security from being inside. Another main element is being surrounded by people who are calm such as other family members and who are not worried or stressed by the current situation, which can definitely help you worry less about the current situation.

2. You're anxious

You're edgy. You keep fighting with your siblings and your parents. You have the news on a constant stream and you keep checking for the number of coronavirus cases in the country and praying that they're going down. You can't sleep well, in fact, you have several nightmares. You try unsuccessfully to focus on schoolwork and online courses but your brain keeps spiraling with thoughts of: What if I catch the virus? ; What if someone I love dies from it? ; What is going to happen? ; Will I fail my classes? ; Will I graduate? Will I lose my financial aid?

The uncertainty of the pandemic as well as the country's financial situation and their impact on a personal and societal level have possibly been the most common themes of my discussions with students for the past six months. Uncertainty breeds anxiety, and there's uncertainty whichever way we turn. It does not help that you may be surrounded by people who are on edge and keep dredging up a list of worries. Aside from talking to

your counselor to learn the skills to manage these feelings and stay calm, you can make a list of things you can control, such as: Only watching the news at night, wearing your clothes in the morning instead of staying in your pajamas, doing your assignments, talking to your friends online, or setting a routine. It may sound silly but this will reduce your uncertainty by reminding you that even in such uncontrollable situations there are some things that you can do to help yourself.

3. You're angry

You probably don't need me to tell you this right now, but there are many things to feel angry about. Whether you're frustrated at the people who are not taking the quarantine seriously, those who have brought the country to bankruptcy, or your professor who doesn't take into account the fact the internet connection in Lebanon is unreliable. It's normal and quite common to feel upset and angry especially when you feel stuck, misunderstood and unsupported. Remember, feelings are not meant to last. Both positive and negative feelings are transient. When anger overcomes us it is usually the result of accumulated frustrations that trigger the sympathetic nervous system. This in turn puts our mindset in a fight or flight response and we tend to do or say things to hurt others (fight) or to collapse in crying fits. The first thing to do is when you notice you're angry is to accept the feeling and remind yourself that it shall pass. You can do some deep breathing, quick prayer or meditation to help you calm down faster. Once you're calm, you can now think through the causes of your frustration and try to solve them or at least aspects within your control.

4. You're overwhelmed

Your assignments are piling up, you wake up late and can't make it to live online classes, every time you open your book to study you feel you're hyperventilating and you end up just closing the book or logging off to avoid it altogether. Transitioning from a typical to an online classroom in such a short time has caused a lot of stress and angst for you, your classmates and your professors. Studying from home on your own takes a lot more self-discipline than going to class. But, even if you feel you have no self-discipline, there is still a lot you can do to alleviate this feeling and motivate yourself to be productive. Try to make a list of task and prioritize tasks that are urgent. Try to only focus on achieving the urgent tasks and only if you have energy left tackle the less-urgent ones. Divide your assignments and tasks into smaller steps that can feel easier to achieve. Set up a plan that is realistic do not assume that you will finish three chapters and 1000-words assignment in one day. For example, you can set up a plan to start the introduction of the assignment and read 1 chapter. Remember being overwhelmed is also a feeling, and like other feelings, it will go away especially when you make a realistic plan. Be careful, insisting on achieving everything at the same time despite feeling overwhelmed can lead to burn-out, thus divide and conquer.

5. You're guilty

Somewhere during the 20th century, western societies acquired the cult of productivity. We are not dissimilar in Lebanon. Actually, many-a-time during the past few months I have had discussions with students that were telling me that they felt guilty because they were not productive enough or that they feel they're not doing anything at all. Despite what post-industrialist society wants you to think, you are not a robot. You are not meant to be productive all the time. In fact, it has been shown by research that taking breaks and relaxing can make you more productive, and better at problem solving when you get to actually doing your tasks.

6. You're sad/grieving

It's been three years you've been working hard and you were looking for the graduation ceremony. You had plans to go to prom and celebrate your achievement with your friends. You're a sophomore or junior and you had plans to travel with your friends for the summer and now your plans are cancelled. You were meant to start graduate school or an internship abroad and could not wait to start your life as an emerging adult. You turned 18 and you planned to throw the biggest party with your friends but quarantine delayed your plans.

There is no denying that the pandemic completely derailed life as we know it. Some of you may feel guilty about being sad and grieving these lost experiences as this might seem small compared to the situation of others who may be sick and cannot afford to have plans. However, keep in mind that it is natural to feel sad, angry, frustrated, disappointed no matter what else is going on. This pandemic is temporary, whenever you get hopeless you can start making plans to re-schedule these events that are important to you.

7. You're stuck and unsure

In a lot of ways, the coronavirus pandemic is forcing everyone to stay frozen in time. If you had to hit pause on some aspect of your life, whether it's an internship or a new relationship you might be wondering what your next step ought to be. This may create a feeling of dread and despair with nothing to look forward to. Remember, the quarantine is temporary. Set a backup plan, for when the pandemic is over and we go back to a semi-regular life. Then set a plan B in case the first plan is not achievable. This should help you retrieve the feeling of having goals to look forward to achieving.

8. You're numb

With everything going on, it might come as a shock to you that you wake up one day and feel absolutely nothing. Believe it or not that too is to be expected. Even in the most chaotic of times, it is impossible to be on an emotional high 24/7. You might have had some fears, and worries when the quarantine first started but now you may feel that you have adjusted to this new "normal" and this might lead to being quite indifferent.

9. You're jealous

You look on social media and see your friends posting pictures of their work-outs, the new recipe they were trying or a new dance on Tiktok and you feel a pang of jealousy. Why are they able to enjoy this quarantine time while you sit there wallowing under the covers, binging on junk food and Netflix series? To tell you the truth sure some people are managing to still have some fun doing activities in this quarantine but even these people have days where they feel completely dejected and hopeless and just want to sit in bed and do nothing. Remember that we are all going through this for the first time. None of us were prepared for it thus, how you choose to spend this time is up to you and cannot be compared to what others are doing. One of the many skills we teach in counseling is self-compassion. Most of us, tend to be more understanding and compassionate toward others and more critical and judgmental toward ourselves. You are a human being, you are allowed to feel bad and negative on some days. Accept it, and wait it out again all feelings are temporary. However if these feelings last longer than a few days talk to a counselor, we can help.

10. You're lonely

Sure you have your family around you and may even have extended family members living with you. Sure you may chat with your significant other or your friends online every night. Yet, you cannot help but feel lonely. You miss your partner's hug, you miss seeing your friends and hanging out with them at BB. You even miss the lame dad jokes your friends used to make or when they used to tease you. As human beings, we are social animals. We crave contact it is absolutely normal to miss in-person interactions with people you care about. If you have the chance to hug the people who live with you then that is great. If not, remind yourself that this is only temporary and soon enough you will be able to do all of these things. Believe it or not, loneliness is too a temporary feeling.

To tell you the truth, this list is only the tip of the iceberg of the many feelings that some of you are experiencing. From depression to boredom, from inadequacy to excitement, from hope to hopelessness most of us are going through the whole emotions at this time. Regardless of how you feel, remember that the impact this has on you is still valid and real. A colleague of mine that specializes in positive psychology, was saying that emotions are like guests in a hotel. A hotel cannot refuse a guest even when that guest is not really

welcome. Thus, welcome your emotions, accept them, embrace them, enjoy the feelings that are enjoyable and be patient and compassionate with the ones that are negative. As I tell all my students, “this too shall pass”.

Norma Moussally, PhD