Is it anticipatory grief that you're feeling?

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Morning routines vary in every household. Some start with a hustle of cooking breakfast for the kids while trying to get dressed for work, while others allow for a meditative walk to catch the sunrise on Tumamoc Hill and then a leisurely cup of coffee on the drive to the office.

These habits help you set a consistent pace to run the weekly work-life marathon. When your sense of routine and normality is interrupted or eliminated, as has been the case for all of us in recent months, the scaffolding of assumptions that each day will arrive as usual is shaken.

In the midst of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the University financial crisis, you might notice a tightness in your gut, fatigue and heaviness all over your body, and trouble with sleep. Or maybe you feel waves of irritability, moments of tearfulness, and a growing worry that you can't shake: What will my future look like?

These reactions could be a manifestation of anticipatory grief, as we mourn not only what is lost but also what could be forever changed - for ourselves and our communities.

According to grieving expert David Kessler, anticipatory grief often centers on death, including the impending loss of a terminally ill loved one. However, we can also grieve our sense of safety and "broadly imagined futures [1]," such as visiting a child at Family Weekend, going on a dream vacation, or even enjoying a date night with a partner.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to addressing grief. The process can be difficult and confusing. While the traditional stages of grief [2] described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler can serve as helpful guideposts, it's important to remember, especially now, that grieving is a unique, individual experience. It has no time limit, and there is no one right way to do it.

A first step toward navigating anticipatory grief is naming what you're experiencing. By describing the feelings (e.g., sadness, anger, regret, fear), you are able to own them, instead of allowing them to own you. If you are struggling to identify your emotions, apps such the Mood Meter [3], produced by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, can help.

Once you know your emotions, you can feel and move through them. For many people, talking to a friend, family member or community contact is very powerful. Consider approaching someone you trust and asking them to lend a listening ear, without offering advice. Daily journaling or mind-body practices, such as yoga or mindfulness [4], can also help you move through these feelings.

Know that you are not alone, and you have the tools to get through the grief. When you give your emotions the space and time they need, you will find it easier to return to the present moment and choose what can be done today, instead of imagining the worst.
Breathe through the feelings and return to the here and now. Let go of what can't be controlled, and stock up on compassion for yourself and others. Take heart and comfort in the fact that we can support, grieve and change together.

James R. Naughton is an employee assistance counselor at Life & Work Connections. A two-time alumnus of the University of Arizona, he is a licensed professional counselor with more than 21 years of experience. His expertise includes helping clients process trauma with an array of body-centered therapeutic tools, including somatic experiencing. He is currently leading Practicing the Pause and Pivot, a 15-minute Zoom session that helps University employees navigate stress, held every Thursday at 10 a.m.

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A version of this article originally appeared on the Life & Work Connections website.

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[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StSFYIxcqu0&list=PLACCBLTO6kfh50cM7O-4z2SVP---v8RwZ
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