

Commentary: To a class of 2020 college grad, the thought of a post-pandemic ‘normal’ brings double the anxiety

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When President Joe Biden announced last month that we will potentially be resuming a version of post-pandemic normalcy [on the Fourth of July](#), my elation was quickly matched by an unshakable sense of anxiety.

As a member of the class of 2020, my first brush with what was supposed to be independent adulthood has been a year spent in quarantine. Not only am I unsure of what post-pandemic life will look like, I’m also entering a world that looks vastly different from the one I was prepared for by all my years of schooling.

We graduated into [record unemployment](#) and under the same crushing student loan debt that’s been weighing on the millennials who graduated before us. Friends whose job offers were rescinded or pushed out for months on end were left scrambling. Even for those of us who were able to secure jobs during the pandemic, many have struggled.

The thought of what life may look like after we’re vaccinated and no longer making decisions based on reopening tiers and inoculation phases makes me think of all the quintessential experiences my graduating class missed. I spent four years envisioning painting a rock on Northwestern University’s Lakefill and having one final spring with all of my classmates and friends as the culmination of my college experience. Instead, I celebrated one of the most important milestones of my life in the living room of my childhood home, with a Zoom ceremony.

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I know that I've been luckier than many in the past year. Others are navigating painful national news of people who look like them being attacked. Many are unemployed. And yet, the daily toll of coping with an invisible threat to your life and the health of those you love, coupled with the added uncertainties of finding my way in the professional, post-graduation world, is enough to make me wonder how anyone is making it through at all.

And now, not only will I need to figure out how the new "normal" will look, like everyone else, I will also need to shape my post-college identity — whom do I want to surround myself with and what direction do I want my life to take.

I realize the duality of this anxiety is unique to the class of 2020, because unlike previous generations, we haven't yet had the chance to figure out what life after college looks like without a pandemic. And I get the sense that, among my peers, I'm not the only one feeling this way.

Karen Cassiday, a Chicago-area clinical psychologist, said that many of her young adult patients are wrestling with feelings of anxiety as things start to reopen.

Not only have many young adults moved back in with their parents when they weren't intending to, she said, but they're facing a job environment that's far different from the one they were prepared for.

It's true. Many of us spent four years trying to do the "right" things to set ourselves up for the future, only to have most of that tossed away.

More than half of younger workers, ages 18 to 29, said it was difficult to feel motivated to do their work while teleworking during the pandemic, according to a December [report](#) — more than any other age group.

Cassiday said the change in job environment has also affected the way young people learn to form their own communities.

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“It used to be assumed, if you got a job, you would be going somewhere, getting together with people, and they would become your social group,” Cassidy said. “Well, what happens if you get a job and it doesn’t matter where you live? How do you socialize when you leave campus?”

A [report](#) published in March by the American Psychological Association found that during the pandemic, Gen Z adults, those ages 18-23, “are doing worse mentally and physically than other generations,” and they were also the most likely to report feeling lonely.

I’m lucky I’ve been able to stay connected to my friends in ways that have become the pandemic norm —texting, the occasional Zoom and sending each other eight TikToks in a row. But many of us have also struggled with the isolation of quarantine and the anger and confusion that comes with seeing friends disregard COVID-19 restrictions.

When it came to the toll pandemic stress has taken, “we see the groups that were most affected were teenagers and young adults, and then parents of young kids,” Cassidy said.

Of course, people in my age group aren’t the only ones with anxiety about reopening. Elizabeth McCarthy, a psychotherapist in Chicago, said that a majority of her patients, who are primarily in their mid-30s and early 40s, are bringing it up in their sessions.

“I think as things started to open up, people have this expectation that they just should be experiencing sheer excitement, and it’s so much more complicated than that,” McCarthy said.

“There’s still that fear piece.”

McCarthy said the biggest tip she gives her patients for coping with reopening anxiety is “really being compassionate and curious about your internal experience. Not judging the feelings that you’re having.”

“I think a lot of people, appropriately so, try to avoid feelings that are heavy, but we really need to make room for them,” McCarthy said.

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Cassiday said the best thing young adults can do is take risks.

“If you don’t take risks in your life and make it an adventure, then the only alternative is boredom and regrets,” Cassiday said. “So that means dare to move out, dare to live on your own, dare to take that job.”

She also said that even if work is completely remote, we need to find a way to make close, in-person relationships.

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s the pandemic or any place on the planet, or you’re one of these astronauts that goes to a Mars colony, you always need the same things: You need community, you need close relationships and you need to know that you matter to the world and other people and that you’re doing things that matter.”