

# NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

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*Resources for Thoughtfully Processing  
Your Time Abroad and Your Return*



*Spring 2020 COVID  
Impact Edition*





Dear Spring 2020 Program Participants,

The past few weeks have seen a lot of changes on your campuses, in your communities, and abroad. We know this has caused a lot of stress and anxiety for all as we try to adapt to these rapidly changing circumstances. As your safety and well-being are our top priority, we returned all students from their program locations abroad back to the US.

This was not a decision that was made lightly and was certainly not the way any of us planned for the semester to go. We are sorry that this was your reality and we know that this whole process is incredibly hard. We know it was heartbreaking to have to leave the location that you had come to know and love. In many cases, we know you did not get a chance to properly say goodbye. We know that for some of you this might be the only time you get to go abroad, which makes this experience even harder. We understand that the climate you returned to in the US is also so uncertain.

We recognize that having your semester interrupted by this global pandemic has, for many, been one of the greatest challenges you have yet faced. The experience of navigating different bureaucratic environments and the possible quarantines and isolation you faced are overwhelming and scary.

It is likely you are continuing to experience a wide range of emotions as you process your time abroad as well as the circumstances that led to your return. The returnee experience is one that is often characterized by conflicting feelings on how to navigate the myriad ways in which you have changed with differing levels of interest and understanding from your friends and family members. Adding this additional layer of concerns over the global pandemic and lack of control over the situation only makes matters worse. Although none of us can fully understand your lived experiences, we wanted to provide you with the means to help you better articulate your reality and help you to examine what you learned.

Our goal with this workbook is to provide you with tools to start unpacking the emotional side of your return along with resources to support you in the weeks and months ahead. We will be offering opportunities for you to engage with AIFS staff to discuss your return and the lessons you learned throughout your experience. We also welcome any questions or needs you have at [alumni@aifs.com](mailto:alumni@aifs.com).

Best,

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## **Before We Begin**

All of you are in different places, both physically and emotionally, in your return. This is true for anyone who has spent time abroad and returned to their home environment. Your semester has the unique experience of returning in the midst of a global pandemic which is traumatic. This is new territory for most of us and in many ways, it feels like we are building the bike as we ride it. Every day brings new developments and the information landscape changes hourly. It is safe to say most feel underprepared for our current reality and the gravity of this situation.

We are grateful to all of you for your compassion, adaptability, courage, and ability to operate in a landscape with a high level of ambiguity. Many of you are balancing academic completion alongside concerns for your health and the health and safety of those you love. We are witnessing a recession impacting industries and fields in unprecedented ways. Colleges and universities are postponing or canceling graduation celebrations. All of you have been impacted by this crisis in ways both big and small and should be proud of how you carried yourself in this unique time. You are likely having to figure out how to deal with your own feelings related to your time abroad and the interruption of that time, given that your sounding board, your go-to community at home, is also dealing with their own uncertainty / emotions / concerns right now.

If you are feeling an overwhelming amount of anxiety or distress related to your return, we strongly encourage you to seek the assistance of trained mental health professionals. They can provide you with additional resources and constructive tips for coping and navigating this time of uncertainty.



## **Acknowledge the Pain**

We think it's essential to first acknowledge your loss. We understand you might feel that the Coronavirus has ruined everything, and you feel a lack of control. Whether you realize it consciously or not, you are likely grieving for the experiences you missed out on by having your time abroad shortened. For those that are graduating in May, you are also navigating the loss of your identity as a college student and a lack of opportunities to celebrate your accomplishments in finishing your degree. This transition from college student to career professional is a tricky time for most and it's understandable to be feeling even more confused and uncertain in the current climate. Grief is a complex emotion and one that has to be acknowledged and processed so you can move through to more productive spaces.

In an article for the Harvard Business Review, David Kessler, considered to be one of the foremost experts on grief said in regard to COVID-19

“We’re feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way, and we realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this

is the point at which they changed. The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we're grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air. We're also feeling anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is that feeling we get about what the future holds when we're uncertain. Usually it centers on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have the normal thought that we'll lose a parent someday. Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming. There's something bad out there. With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing for people. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We're feeling that loss of safety. I don't think we've collectively lost our sense of general safety like this. Individually or as smaller groups, people have felt this. But all together, this is new. We are grieving on a micro and a macro level."

If you are feeling a sense of shock, frustration, anger, grief, fear, guilt, resentment, anxiety, or sadness, we think it's important to acknowledge that and allow yourself to fully feel and own those emotions. You have every right to be hurt or disappointed, both for yourself as an individual and also for the larger collectives – your group abroad, your extended network of friends and family, as well as humanity at large. The important thing is not to stay locked into these initial emotions, but to move through them. Everyone will process this situation at the pace that works best for them. Given the uncertain nature of the pandemic, it is likely you will continue to feel the effects of this experience for an extended period of time. We encourage you to revisit this resource if you are not yet ready to process this experience.

You might also not have the vocabulary to describe how you are feeling or handling this situation yet, and that's ok. As this is the first pandemic that many people have navigated, this is unfamiliar territory for most of us. This situation is highlighting how our individual actions have a ripple effect to the world around us. It is providing us all an opportunity to be mindful of the impact we all have on the planet and each other. This situation is also impacting how we learn, work, socialize and travel on a global scale, which is overwhelming as it is all happening at once.

When things feel overwhelming, it can be helpful to ask yourself some guided questions to help gain perspective and clarity. We encourage you to revisit the questions in this guide to see how your responses evolve as you continue to reflect on your study abroad experience and as the COVID situation continues to unfold.

### **Questions to Get Started**

What are the top three emotions you currently have related to your return?

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## **Changes – Turn and Face the Strange (and Reflect on the Skills Gained)**



Although you might not recognize it yet, you have grown and changed so much (and will continue to do so) through this experience. Studying abroad is a process and along the way you navigated many steps to make it possible to leave the country, including securing funding for the experience, ensuring credits would transfer, processing a lot of information, and saying goodbye to your support systems.

Your ability to find resources, connect with others, and successfully navigate this process for yourself means you are set up for successfully navigating similar processes again. All of your small actions in preparing for your time abroad provided countless opportunities to develop and refine skills that can transfer to navigating crises like the one we currently face, as well as your future careers later on. While abroad, you also learned how to navigate unfamiliar territory, which will be useful to you every time you start a new job or visit somewhere outside of your home and have to learn, adapt to the new situation, and make informed decisions.



We encourage you to give yourself space and time. We live in an increasingly fast-paced world, but it's important to slow down periodically, and reflect as it provides a much-needed reset for our brains and bodies, especially in times of crisis. This reflection also helps us to more easily see patterns in our experiences that can inform what we want to do in our future. We want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the ways in which you have changed and grown through the different intercultural experiences that you've had, including your time abroad.



We acknowledge that all of you are at different points in your process and bring lifetimes of unique experiences with you on your journey. Some of you might be feeling angry, sad or frustrated or a combination of all three from what you experienced. That's a normal part of the process for any returnee and is certainly heightened for your group due to these unprecedented circumstances.



This reflection will help you to better understand those feelings. And just like when you first engaged with a new culture, this process can and does repeat itself. This activity gives you a chance to start reflecting on concrete ways in which you have changed along with the skills you developed through your participation in your experience abroad. We think it's important to acknowledge that sometimes engaging with a different culture wasn't amazing. Sometimes it was incredibly difficult, but it is often not what people want to hear about. However, it's important to give a voice to the full range of your experience. We encourage you to connect with others who have studied abroad to share your real stories – the good, the bad and the ugly. Even though all of you have varied experiences, all of us have an interest in

the global challenges we all face. Study abroad returnees form a community of passionate people and it's important to connect with each other today - and let these connections build a bridge to your future - wherever that might be. Fellow study abroad returnees are sometimes able to provide a level of support and understanding that family and friends who have not spent time abroad might not be able to provide.

Spend some time thinking about how you were before you had this cross-cultural experience, while you were participating in it and how you are now that the experience has been completed. List the skills developed along the way so you can revisit them and more clearly see the impact of your time abroad, and the resources you have to face these challenges.

### **Identity**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Political Views**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Career Goals**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Contribution (to Your Campus, Community or the World Beyond)**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Feelings on "Home"**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Relationship with Time**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
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**Personal Style**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Role of Family**

Before: \_\_\_\_\_  
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During: \_\_\_\_\_  
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After: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Skills Developed: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## **Capacity for Resiliency**

We know that the past few months have been challenging for all of you in different ways. Hopefully you recognize that you are incredibly resilient and are capable of handling more than you ever thought you could. Life is filled with challenges – both large and small. It’s important to recognize moments of challenge and how you successfully faced them as each new challenge better prepares you for anything your future might hold. We recommend using the guided self-reflection exercises in this workbook to help you acknowledge these moments of challenge, what you learned along the way, how you overcame them, and the skills you built in the process.

As a study abroad returnee, it’s normal for friends and family to want to hear about your experience. They might not recognize that you are still processing everything you have gone through and need time to formulate the language to summarize this chapter of your life. It’s ok to let people know that you still are working through this and we have provided you with some phrases you can use and adapt to fit where you are in your process.

*“My time abroad was complex. I’m still unpacking all that I have experienced and look forward to sharing it with you in the future once I’ve had a bit more time to process it all. I appreciate your interest in wanting to support me during this difficult time and am excited to share more with you as soon as I can.”*

Perhaps you’ve had a bit more time to consider the situation but are still struggling to find the words and to make meaning from your experience.

*“I was studying in Spain when the COVID crisis happened last year. The turn of events requiring us to return to the U.S. happened so fast. There were so many unknowns, including where we would live for the rest of the semester, how we would finish our coursework and earn the credit, and about just how bad the pandemic would be in the U.S. We relied on one another those last*













*“I had the opportunity to study in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the spring of 2020. Although I was originally supposed to be spending the full semester, the Coronavirus pandemic quickly escalated, and the program was suspended when the State Department issued a global level three warning. Although I was experiencing a wide range of emotions, including disappointment in having to leave this new culture and language I was enjoying learning, I was able to remain calm and worked with my program’s Resident Director to adjust my flight arrangements and safely return to the US. Over the course of several weeks, I was able to secure accommodation Stateside, physically distance from others to ensure I was mitigating risk in contracting or spreading the virus and moved into a virtual environment to complete my classes. Although it was an adjustment for everyone, I was able to successfully complete my coursework and also increased my proficiency with new technologies in the process. I stayed in contact with my homestay family and friends I made in country, which has also helped me to continue with my language learning and maintain a tie to my host country. As a result of this experience, I know I can remain levelheaded and handle stressful situations that are rapidly evolving. This will serve me well as I navigate any challenges I might face in the (specific role) at (specific company).”*

This response is successful because it acknowledges how emotional and challenging the situation was, but also demonstrates the participant’s ability to use their resources, remain focused in stressful situations and adapt to new situations – all of which are valuable in any personal and professional environment.

Currently less than 10% of US college students have any sort of international experience, so being able to leverage the time you spent abroad to an employer can make you an even more attractive candidate for employment.

## The Returnee Process

After taking time to manage the immediate crisis-related emotions, concerns, and responsibilities, you will have to navigate the “standard” process of returning from study abroad. Even though the returnee process is unique to the individual, there are some shared commonalities.



**All the Emotions:** Returnees often experience a profound sense of homesickness for their study abroad location parallel to a sense of happiness over getting to see their friends, family and pets. You might feel a sense of relief to be in a familiar environment while also being angry or sad at the circumstances that brought you there. You might have a fear for the future, especially if you are graduating at the end of this semester.

**Lack of Understanding:** Returnees often report feeling like no one wants to hear about their time abroad or wants a simplified answer to the common question of “How was it?” Your experiences abroad were complex and cannot often be summarized in a one-word answer or short phrase. Returnees often say something like “It was amazing” because they truly don’t know where to begin in unraveling all that the experience entailed. Given that your experience was cut short, you might be feeling even more uncertain of how to share your time abroad with others.



This guide along with the companion piece “*Marketing Your International Experience*” which will be sent to you by email in a few weeks will provide you with suggestions for how to start that process for the different audiences you encounter, including future employers who will want to know how this experience makes you better prepared for your career.



**Missed Opportunities:** We promise you that almost every returnee has activities they never got around to or missed out on and wishes they had more time abroad. This is not said to minimize your sadness, but to illustrate that there is always more you want to do and see. We recognize that you likely feel this to an even greater degree.

## Tips for Navigating Your Return

**Be present** – Many returnees find it challenging to stay present in the return, especially if you connected deeply with your host culture or feel you missed out on the full experience. Staying present will allow you to better navigate the emotional side of your return.



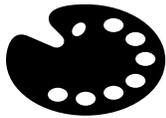
**Practice self-care** – Your mind and body are under a tremendous amount of stress right now, so it's even more important than usual to make sure you are taking care of yourself. Maintain healthy eating habits, get enough sleep and give yourself a break away from information overload and screens to build resilience.

**Maintain connections** – The relationships you built during your time abroad, no matter how limited, have the capacity to last a lifetime, but you need to nurture them. Stay connected to the friends you made from your program, the locals you met (including your Resident Director and other program staff), and your homestay family through the ever-expanding technology available to you, including WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. AIFS offers two spaces for program participants to connect with each other on [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) and we hope you will join us there.



**Ask for help** – If you are feeling an overwhelming amount of anxiety or distress related to your return, we strongly encourage you to seek the assistance of trained mental health professionals. They can provide you with additional resources and constructive tips for coping and navigating this time of uncertainty.

**Be kind (to yourself and others)** – These are tough times for everyone.



**Express yourself** – In addition to traditional journaling, use different mediums to express your emotions connected to the study abroad experience (e.g. paint a scene or try cooking a recipe from your time abroad or create a playlist of the music that reminds you of your host culture). Sharing these pieces with friends and family can help them to connect to your time abroad and appreciate the experience in a different way as well.

**Practice gratitude** – In the never-ending news cycle it can feel like everything is going wrong, but the reality is there is still a lot for which to be thankful. Start small by naming one thing from your day or time abroad and then build from there. Journal / document moments from your time abroad that you can return to for which you are most thankful.



**Vote as much as your citizenship allows** – It's an important way to exercise your voice and your agency and will have a lasting impact on the years ahead.



**Share your experience** – Visit the AIFS alumni website ([www.aifsabroad.com/alumni](http://www.aifsabroad.com/alumni)) and your study abroad office to learn about different ways that you can share your time abroad with others. This will help you to continue to process your own experience as well as help others to learn valuable tips for navigating the study abroad process.



## **Keeping Your Experience Alive**

Part of what many appreciate about their time abroad is the opportunity to go outside of their known comfort zone. You might have found yourself trying new foods, speaking a new language, and being interested in subjects that had not been on your radar before. To put it simply, you might have felt like you were the best version of yourself abroad. Friends and family might have noticed and commented on how you have changed and might not always understand the changes they've seen.

It's common for those who have studied abroad to feel pressure to balance how they were abroad with how they were before their time abroad. It's important to remember that no one can take the time you had abroad away from you. It is forever a part of your DNA and you can never fully go back to the person you were before because that version of yourself simply no longer exists.

Some of you might feel like you did not have the opportunity to change as much as you had hoped or planned through your experience being shortened. While we understand this is a possibility, we want to remind you that there are also rich opportunities to engage in cross-cultural learning all around and we have detailed some examples below.

- Blogging or journaling about your experience and about the post-experience time
- Check out [Google Arts & Culture](#) and take part in tours of more than 1,200 museums worldwide as well as free tours through US National Parks and 360-degree views of renowned locations around the globe, including the Taj Mahal, the Coliseum, and the Sydney Opera House.
- Continue to seek out experiences and narratives that vary from your own – enjoy content created by those who have different social identities than you
- Talking about your experience with others - being able to be a resource for others changes lives.
- Connect others into these new cultures – serve as a guide to friends and family
- Walk more and visit new spaces – not only is it great for your physical and mental health, it also allows you to get a fresh perspective on the world around you
- Stay in touch with those you met during the experience - LinkedIn is a great way to do that, which we will be talking more about later in the day
- Volunteer in different offices on your campuses (ex: SAO or career services office) It is a great way to keep the experience fresh and gain skills for your resume

## Living a Globally Focused Life

As the COVID-19 situation continues to impact the world and systems around us unbelievably fast, it has most people experiencing an increased sense of uncertainty for the future. In addition, many of you might be feeling lost and a bit overwhelmed from the transformative experiences college provides, including study abroad. This is understandable as the years spent in college are ones filled with myriad adjustments. You are learning about yourself as much as you are learning about those around you and it's expected to be unsure. The added layer of the uncertainty provided by the pandemic amplifies this response.

We want all of you to know that there is not just one path to being content in life, so please take the pressure off yourself to make the "right" decision about which job you accept out of college, which location you call home, and / or having a perfect plan in place for the rest of your life. The best five-year plans often get adjusted as you learn about opportunities that were not on your radar and life takes place. Our lives are filled with millions of choices, some of which you will love and some that will be challenging. Remaining open to new experiences and opportunities is one of the best ways to expand the impact of your time abroad.

We encourage you to continue thinking both pragmatically and hopefully about your future. This reality is providing all of us with an opportunity to consider creative solutions to old and new challenges. The long-term impact of the pandemic has yet to be seen, but humanity will continue. We will all adjust and adapt, and your time abroad has positioned you perfectly to navigate this uncertainty successfully and serve as a leader to your peers.

Now, more than ever, it's important that all of us live globally focused lives because all of us are connected. Our actions here impact life and people in other places just as the decisions made by those in other locations impacts us here. Being globally minded doesn't simply mean traveling and enjoying other people and places around the world, although that helps. Living a globally focused life means acknowledging that you are one of many. It means having an appreciation for ways of doing things outside of what is familiar to you and myriad means of self-expression. It means considering the greater good for humanity.

We encourage you to familiarize yourself with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) which are "an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership." The 17 goals are "a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future."

Although this is a large initiative, it's one that requires many people in order for it to be effective. The action of recycling your meal containers and getting others to do the same has a snowball effect. Walking or biking somewhere instead of driving has an impact. Building a home for native bees or planting a bee-friendly garden on your campus or in your community has a greater impact. You can be a conscientious consumer and practice minimalism. All of these are small ways you can make a larger collective difference in the world.



*"Many small people  
who in many small  
places do many small  
things that can alter the  
face of the world."*

– Quote from the East Side Art  
Gallery on the remains of the  
Berlin Wall

All of you are change agents.

How can you continue to make a positive difference? What is your passion and purpose? What skills do you possess? What is important to you? What will you do now? The answer is different for every person reading this guide. We encourage you to spend some time looking at what you want for your life ahead and pose these questions to start you on a road of reflection that will hopefully last a lifetime.

Get involved with local and state government - run for office yourself or encourage your peers to do so. We need dedicated people who want to change the system to get a seat at the table.

There is not a shortage of need and opportunity out there: racial equality, LGBTQIA+ advocacy, gender equality, support for refugees, education access, climate change, preserving the environment, disease prevention, wildlife preservation, and the list goes on and on. Pick something and get started. Remember that action starts with the individual – which can spread out to your network, your campus, your community, and to the globe. Always remember that your voice and your actions matter.

## **Resources**

### **Books**

[\*“Making Meaning of Education Abroad: A Journal for the Returnee Experience”\*](#) by Chelsea Kindred & Angela Manginelli

*“Maximizing Study Abroad: A Student’s Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use”* by R. Michael Page, Andrew D. Cohen, Barbara Kappler, Julie C. Chi and James P. Lassegard

*“Burn-Up or Splash Down: Surviving the Culture Shock of Re-Entry”* by Marion Knell

*“The Art of Coming Home”* by Craig Storti

*“Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief”* by David Kessler

### **Websites**

[\*“Marketing Your International Experience”\*](#) workbook by AIFS

[\*“Life in the Time of Corona”\*](#): An open source documentary about the global impacts of COVID-19

[\*“That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief”\*](#) article in Harvard Business Review

[\*“9 Ways to Build Your Capacity to Manage Uncertainty”\*](#) article on Mindful Minutes

[\*“These Six Simple Habits Can Help Calm Your Coronavirus Anxieties”\*](#) article on Fast Company

[\*“How to Handle Stress Like a Nascar Pit Crew Member”\*](#) article on Fast Company

[\*“Managing Covid-19 Anxiety”\*](#) Webinar by Aetna

[\*“Gratitude Quiz”\*](#) by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley

[\*“The Neuroscience of Gratitude and How It Affects Anxiety & Grief”\*](#) by Positive Psychology

[\*“Managing Stress and Anxiety”\*](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[\*“Mental Health and COVID-19 – Information and Resources”\*](#) on Mental Health America



*“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”*

– Jane Goodall

# We bring the world together.

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