



**COVID-19**  
**CONFESSIONALS**

AN OPEN STUDY BY CONIFER RESEARCH

# Adapting to COVID-19: Redrawing

**BOUNDARIES**





# Boundaries help guide interactions in multiple areas of our lives

We create boundaries, or unspoken and spoken rules and roles, in every aspect of our lives to navigate our daily interactions, responsibilities, and experiences.

Boundaries are actively challenged and re-drawn when they no longer serve us.



# BOUNDARY

*noun, plural bound•a•ries*

A real or imagined line that marks the edge or limit of something

The limit of a subject or principle

The limit of what is considered to be acceptable behavior

## SPATIAL BOUNDARIES

Boundaries that mark geographic space, or lack thereof, between individuals.  
(e.g. *personal space, space between people in different types of relationships*)

## EMOTIONAL BOUNDARIES

Boundaries that mark different emotions and the mental capacity for them.  
(e.g. *compartmentalizing and making sense of emotions like happiness and anxiety*)

## TEMPORAL BOUNDARIES

Boundaries that mark the time and context of different environments and experiences.  
(e.g. *school is a place that signals learning, the office signals work hours*)

# Methodology

Starting in March 2020, Conifer launched an open study to connect with people and learn how they were adjusting to and coping with the changes brought about by COVID-19.

**By collecting photos, videos, journal entries, and facilitating open discussions, we've created a window into the impact on people around the world—and identified the ways in which their pre-pandemic sense of boundaries have shifted.**



Due to COVID-19...

What was once normal behavior is now in flux

In a world plagued by pandemic, our usual unspoken rules and roles no longer work. People no longer agree on our normal boundaries and may have difficulty seeing eye to eye on new rules and redefined boundaries.

As we juggle our different roles, responsibilities, and emotions, we must actively create, negotiate , and re-draw new boundaries to guide our way.

By working to create new boundaries, we claim more agency over our lives.

SPATIAL

Forced to think about alternative modes of communication while maintaining “safe” physical distance, people are finding other ways to connect.

Video calls with friends & family, curbside conversation

EMOTIONAL

To better manage our mental and emotional states during such uncertain times, we adopt mechanisms and other strategies to cope and survive.

Keeping busy with new hobbies, outdoor activities

TEMPORAL

With temporal boundaries in disarray, different areas of life such as work, school, and fun now bleed together. As a result, people need to work harder to define their time.

Creating an at-home office space, repurposing space

## Eroding boundaries result in a loss of control and an inability to find a moment of respite



.....  
**The home and the office**  
are now **one and the same**

A participant in Chicago doesn't have a desk and works from her bedroom. The boundaries between work and home must be redrawn.

.....  
**Dependence on technology** is now a  
**necessity** rather than **a personal choice**



"We work really hard to keep technology out as much as possible and do it in age appropriate ways. **Now we're just forced into it** for her to do e-learning."

.....  
When the pandemic is everywhere, **retreating from social interactions** becomes a necessity



"I actively attempt to not discuss or consume information about the pandemic. However if I'm using social media, calling or texting with a friend—it's next to **impossible to fully shut it out.**"



.....  
**Parents become teachers;**  
homes become schools

A participant in Vietnam adapts to her children doing schoolwork and playing next to where she works at home.



As boundaries erode and continue to shift around us, we have created ***new boundaries*** as a way to adapt to the new normal.



**...are being created and rebuilt to *regain control over our emotions and experiences***

Our communities, governments, businesses, and other organizations have created *physical and spatial boundaries* to promote public health initiatives.


To account for the these physical disruptions in our daily lives, we have been forced to create **new definitions** of our *personal and emotional boundaries*.

**These boundaries help us to manage our mental states and provide structure for our interpersonal interactions.**

# Re-drawing and adapting to new boundaries requires copious amounts of emotional energy

The worldwide crisis has turned our emotions upside down. By rethinking and improvising our behaviors, we ask ourselves to act against our ingrained values and practices, and do things differently. As a result, we face the stress of constant decision-making, worry over doing things the right way, and discomfort when interacting with people who don't agree.

As different boundaries continue to shift, it is hard minimize and ignore our emotions. Instead, we must find ways to cope and manage them.



*"The best thing that I've found for myself at this time is to **respect my emotions in the moment I'm feeling them.**"*

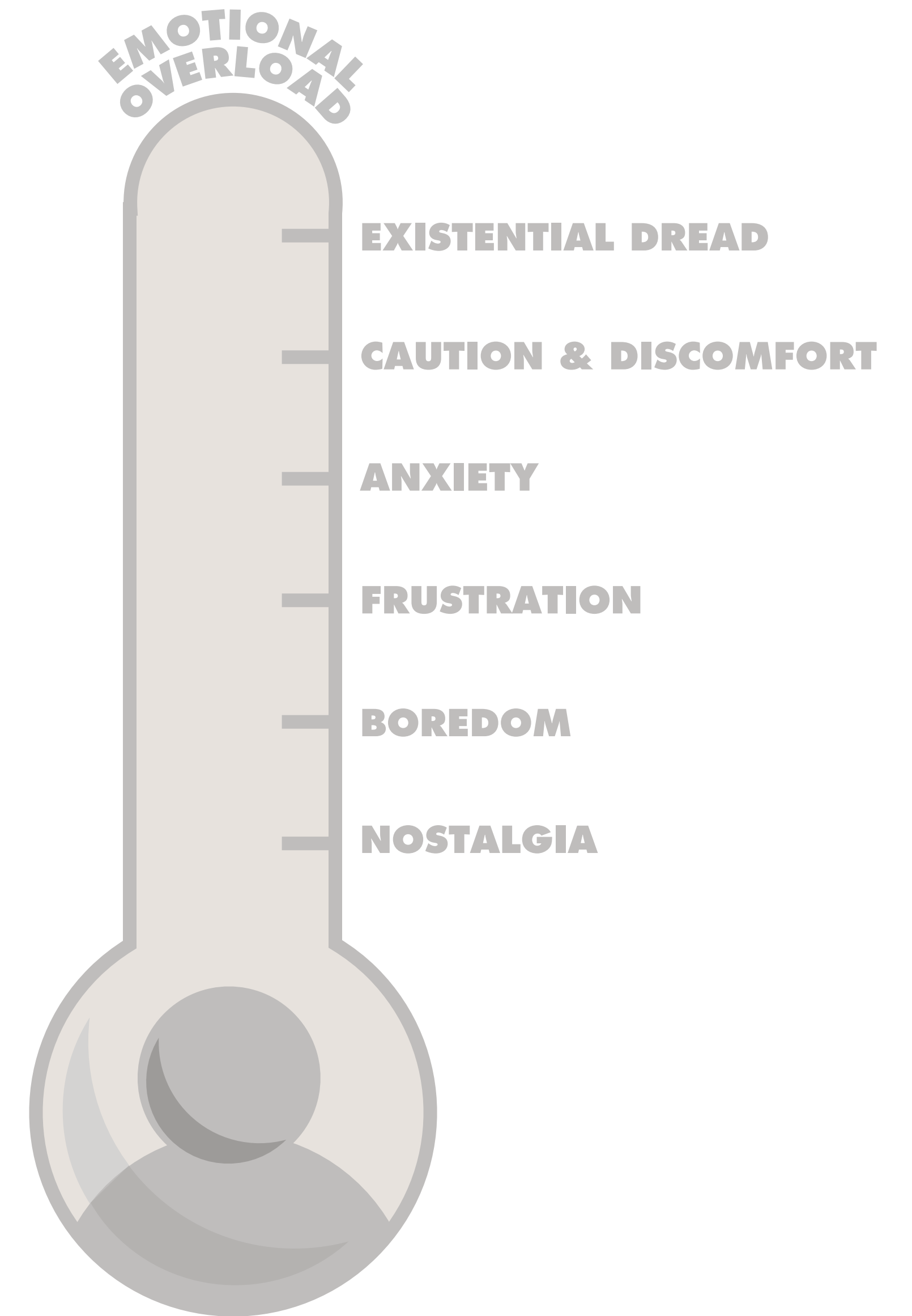
*– Female, 29, New York, NY*



## The fatigue of constant emotional decision-making can quickly become overwhelming

Siloed experiences and environments before the pandemic — meeting friends, working in an office, home, school and more — provided people with greater agency to manage their context-specific emotions. Now that social and spatial boundaries look different than *normal*, emotions are bleeding into one another.

A passing feeling of nostalgia for the comfort of what was can quickly oscillate between existential dread and frustration. Now more than ever, our emotions can change frequently and compound exponentially, until we feel emotionally **overloaded**.







### Caution & Discomfort

I wish I wasn't on this train. I hope I can maintain 6 ft. of distance.

### Anxiety

Everywhere I look, the news is so stressful, but I can't stop reading it.

### Frustration

That group should really have their masks on...

### Nostalgia

Remember when we could do this every weekend?

### Boredom

Every day I go for a bike ride down the same street. I'm tired of the same routine every single day!



### Existential Dread

What's going to happen to my kids? How are they going to change after all of this ends?

Some emotions, more than others, are at the forefront of our daily experiences during the pandemic.




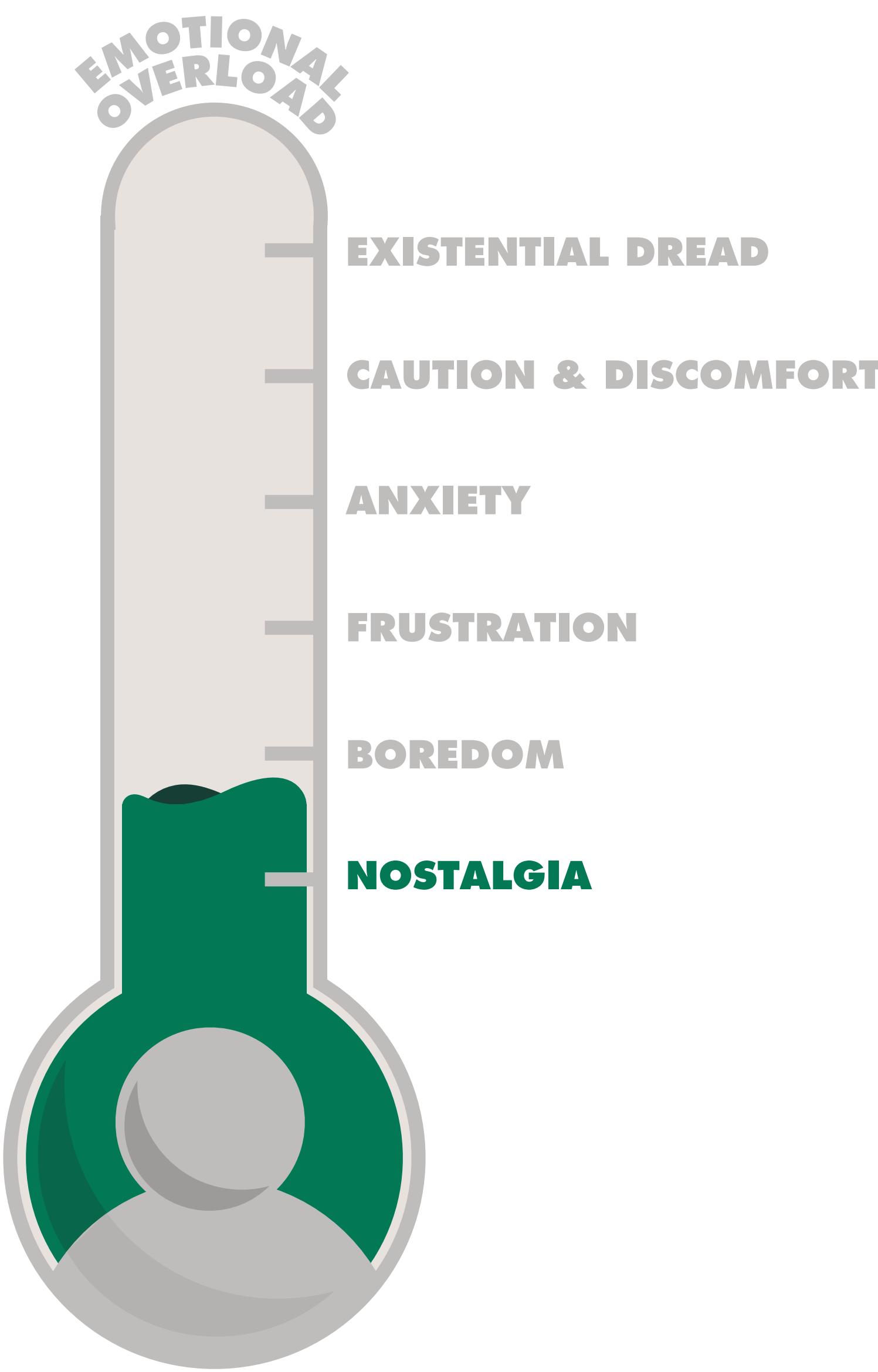
Without *normal* daily routines, it is easy to long for the comfort of pre-pandemic life

-  “I miss being able to wander around grocery stores at my leisure without the stress of contaminating something or being contaminated.”
-  “The strange sight of empty sidewalks, quiet roads, closed restaurants, and boarded stores is **sad and unsettling**.”



Mounting concern for the future

Reminders of the past and of the way life *used* to be highlight the instability of the present and cast doubt on the possibility of a brighter future. Nostalgia may not be an acute or crippling emotion, but the constant longing for the familiar and comfortable can be draining.

-  “I am despondent and homesick, anxious for my city and for the planet. As everyone else, **I question how long this will go on.**”



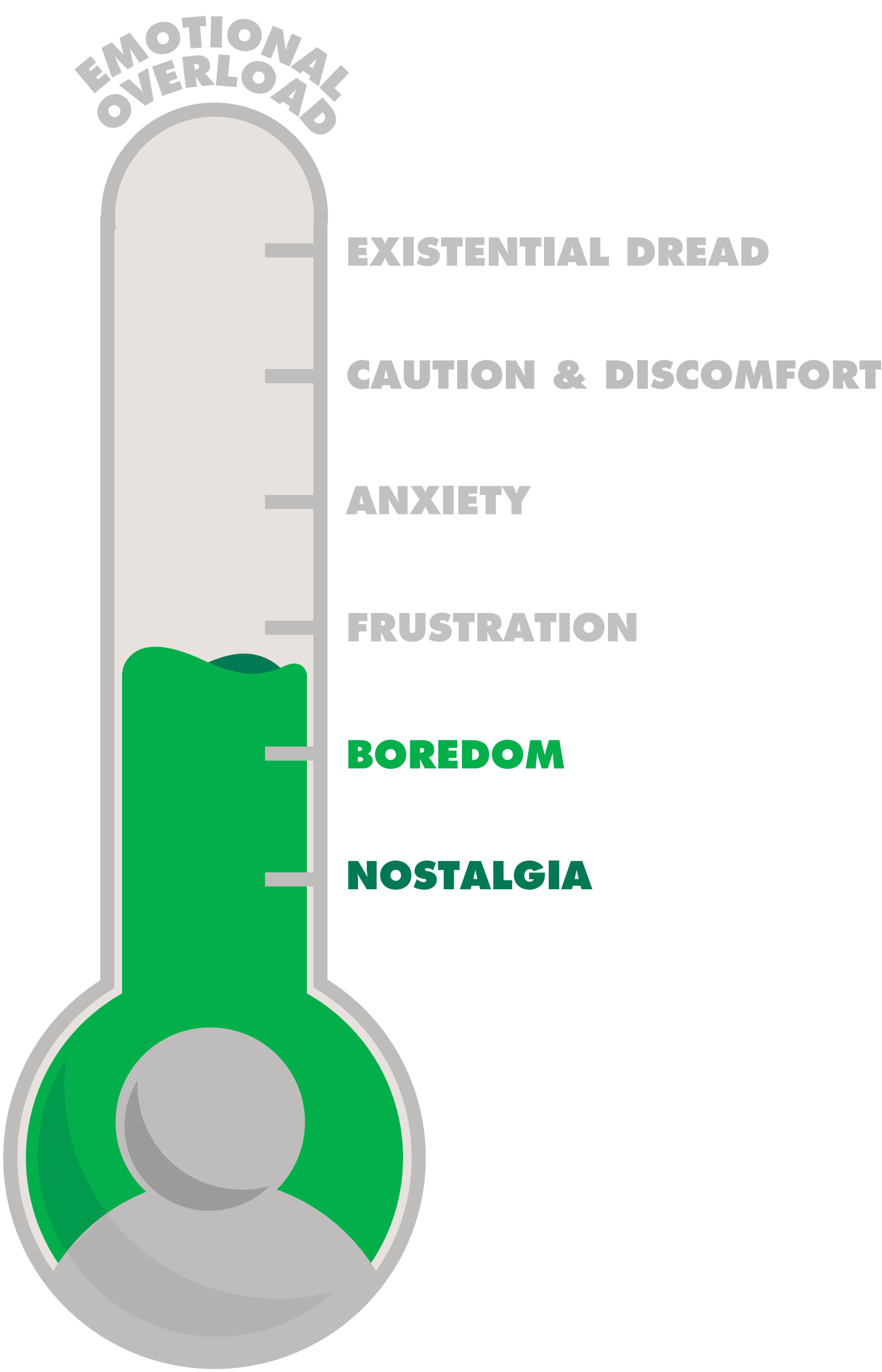
# The monotony of everyday life quickly becomes boring and unfulfilling

-  "At times I feel like the daily grind of the family routine is all about **who can endure dullness and boredom the best.**"
-  "I started a challenge to sketch the cat every night, but got bored after day 3."

## Bored and Busy

Stuck at home, people may find themselves busy, but overwhelmed by completing the same tasks over and over. People may now have a hard time finding meaning in their daily routines.




-  *"This week, I think I really felt two things. I felt the exhaustion of being sheltered-in-place for so long, and I **felt the longing to be as bored as everyone else** seems to be claiming."*

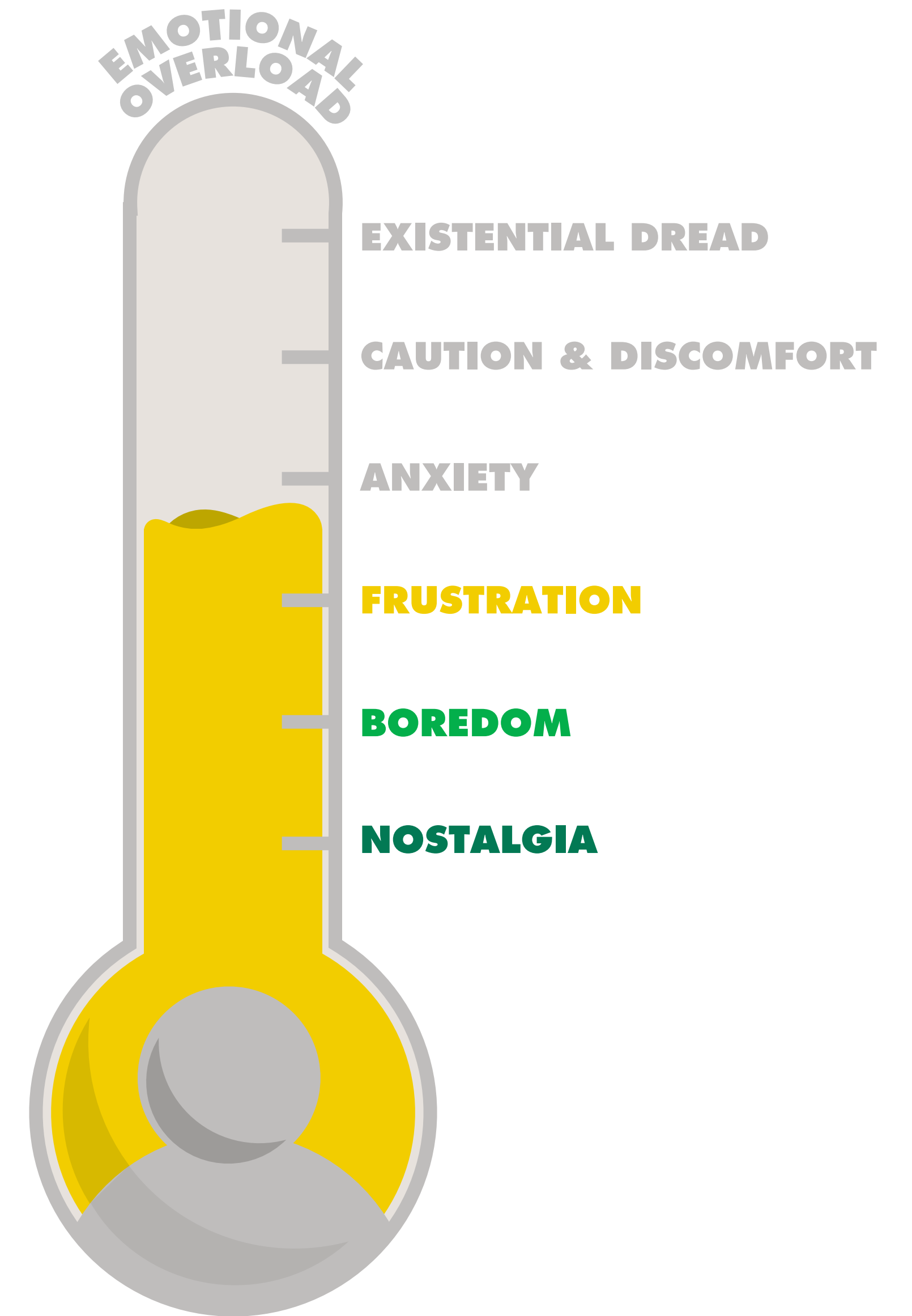







## Frustration is not only normal, but expected

With limited choices and unprecedented restrictions, frustration manifests within ourselves, with others in our lives, with society, and with the world at large.

-  "I am frustrated how medical workers have been placed on a pedestal, **yet not taken care of.**"
-  "What could be more stressful than waiting out a pandemic with a house full of kids? Add a major home repair to the mix! [...] Needless to say it's been beer o' clock around here recently."
-  "**I feel stressed and frustrated everyday.** Not having a job, watching the days tick by, going stir crazy at home, unsure of how to cope during this pandemic (should I be meditating, exercising, making art/crafting, organizing or just binge watching TV?)"



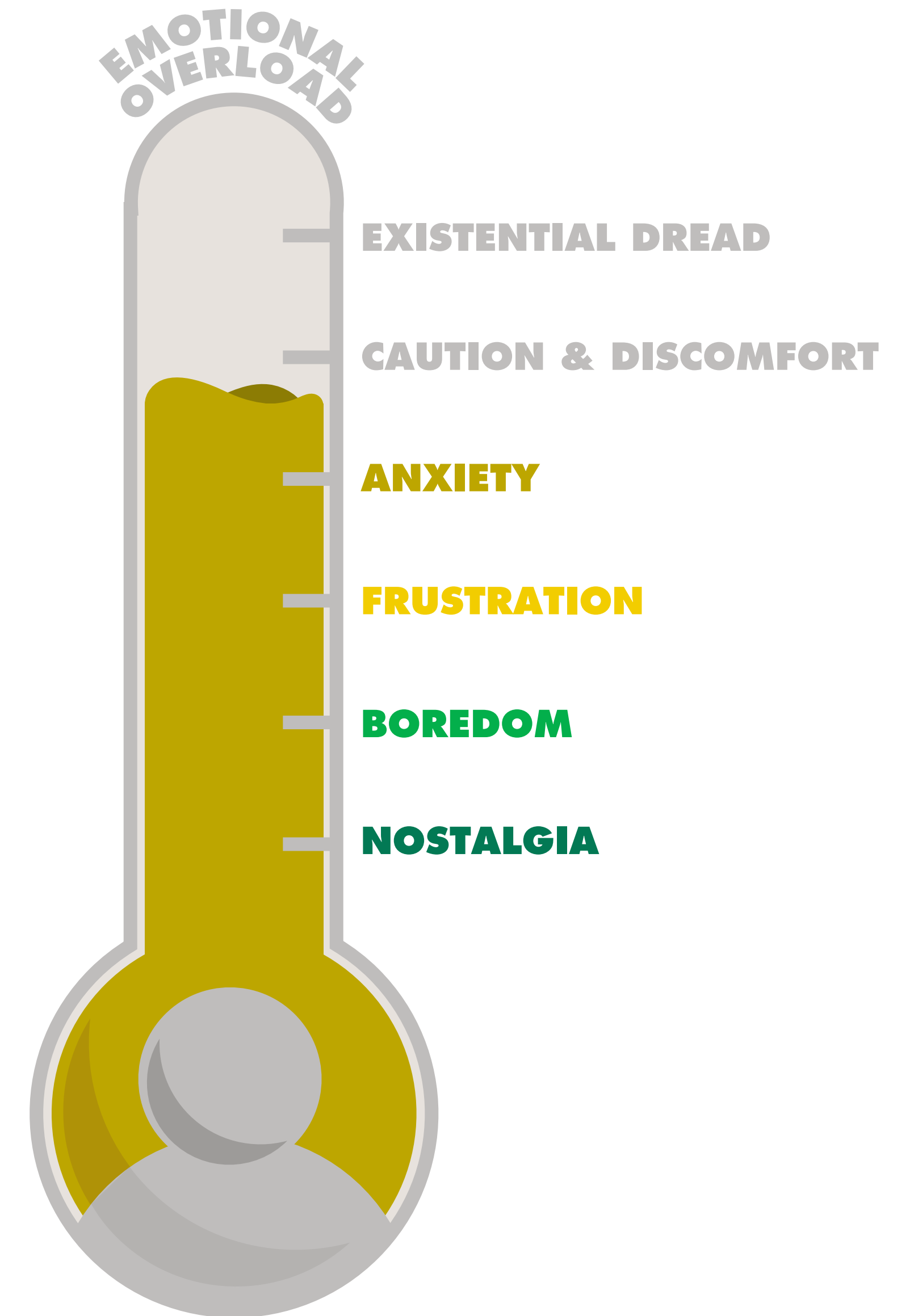
## Daily uncertainties make anxiety a familiar state of being

-  "I am choosing to block out information because it **gives me anxiety.**"
-  "I am **stressed out about the economic fallout of the pandemic** and all the people it is affecting."
-  "I've moved from one **anxiety** at work (project related) to a **whole host of anxieties** and stressors in my personal life."

### Finding distractions and comfort in food

Home cooking projects have helped many people control their anxiety during the pandemic—to cope and as a form of self improvement.

-  *As a typical New Yorker, I simply threw leftovers in the fridge and had an abundance of non-perishable snacks on hand at all times. Today however, **I'm enjoying using my kitchen.***





## With different definitions of *comfort*, it feels safer to exercise additional caution when interacting with the world



**"The world doesn't feel safe**, because not enough people are taking the situation seriously."



**"I feel safe enough when I walk outside**, but only go out for essentials and the occasional mental health walk in the park."



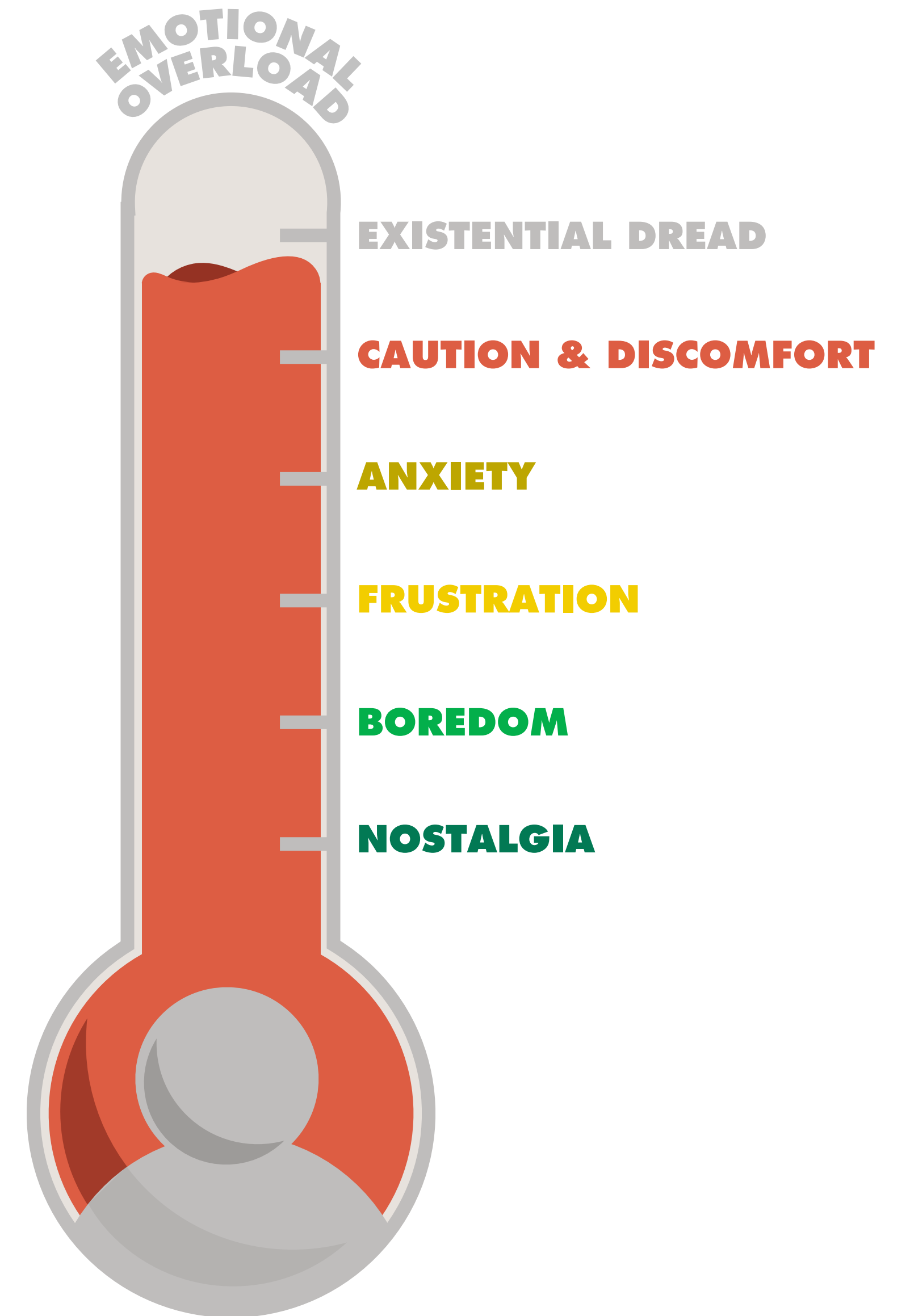
**"The world feels safe, with precautions."**

### Making safety exceptions for sanity

A participant in London and her roommate allow a friend to visit them for dinner once a week. She understands it might be "taboo," but feels comfortable because they all agree it is safe.



**"...it really brightens up our week**, so we've decided it's something we can continue."



# The sheer scale of disruption has made people feel helpless and question what they can truly control



"Thankfully no members of my immediate family or close friends have yet exhibited any symptoms [...] but **I fear that might only be a matter of time.**"



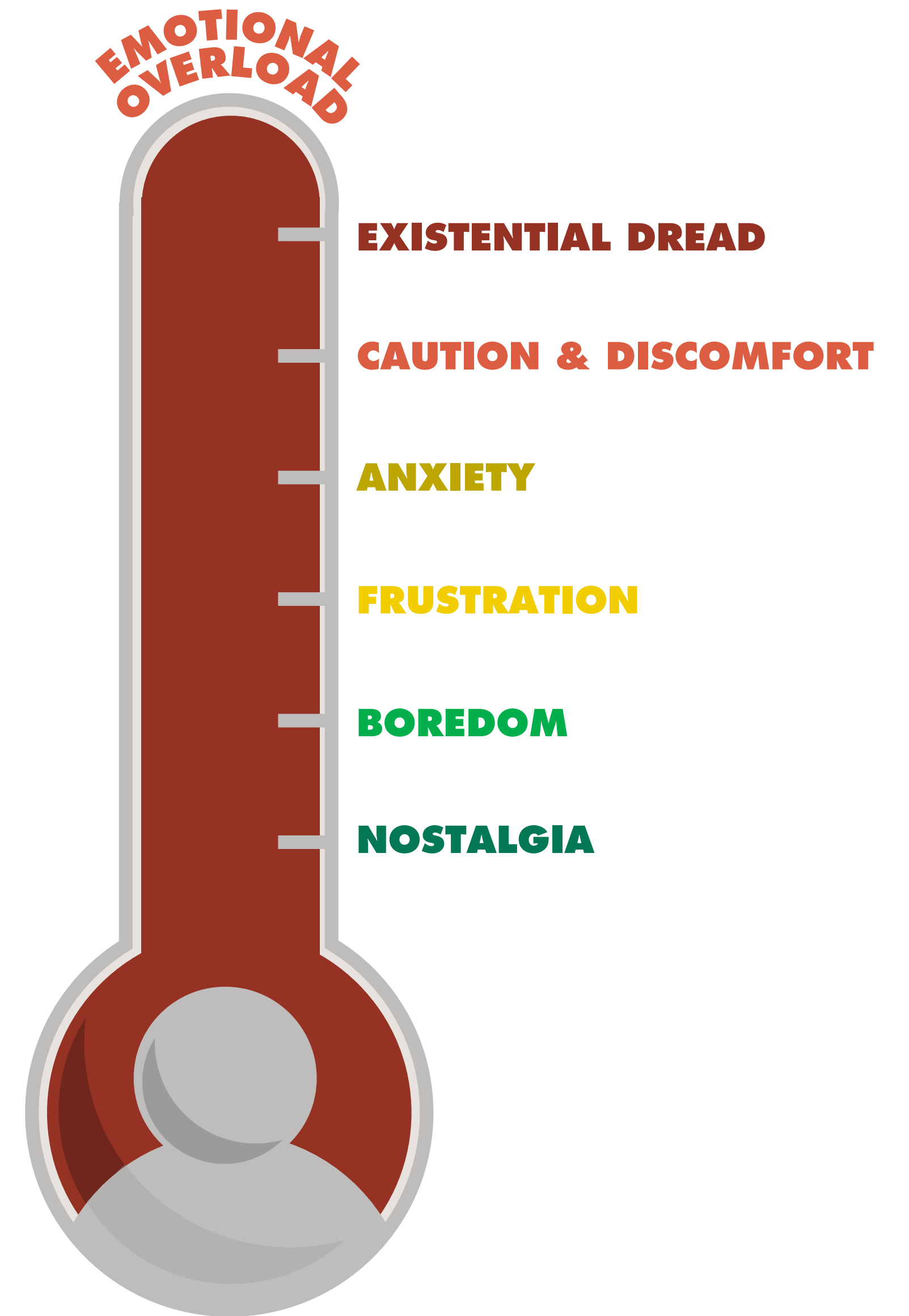
"If there's one thing I hope you learn from this, it's that you can only **control your own actions** and you can only understand yourself."

### Purposefully avoiding stressors

A participant in New York avoids news alerts and information about the pandemic because it overwhelms her. Being furloughed and uncertain about her future, she believes that having *some* control over the information she takes in is better than none.



*"I try not to overwhelm myself and instead focus on smaller doses of information- which I take in when I'm feeling emotionally accepting or strong/comfortable."*







### Caution & Discomfort

I'm taking extra precautions like waiting for an empty car and maintaining my distance from others.

### Anxiety

I've decided to take a break from the news and social media this week!

### Frustration

I'm only joining the group if they agree to follow precautions I'm comfortable with.

### Nostalgia

Let's take extra time to choose a secluded area to sit. You can't join us unless you have a mask!

### Boredom

It's nice to be outside of my house! I'm comfortable not wearing a mask when I know there aren't too many people around me.

### Existential Dread

This pandemic is overwhelming and seems like it will never end! But, we've made changes in our lives to help maintain a sense of normalcy for the kids.

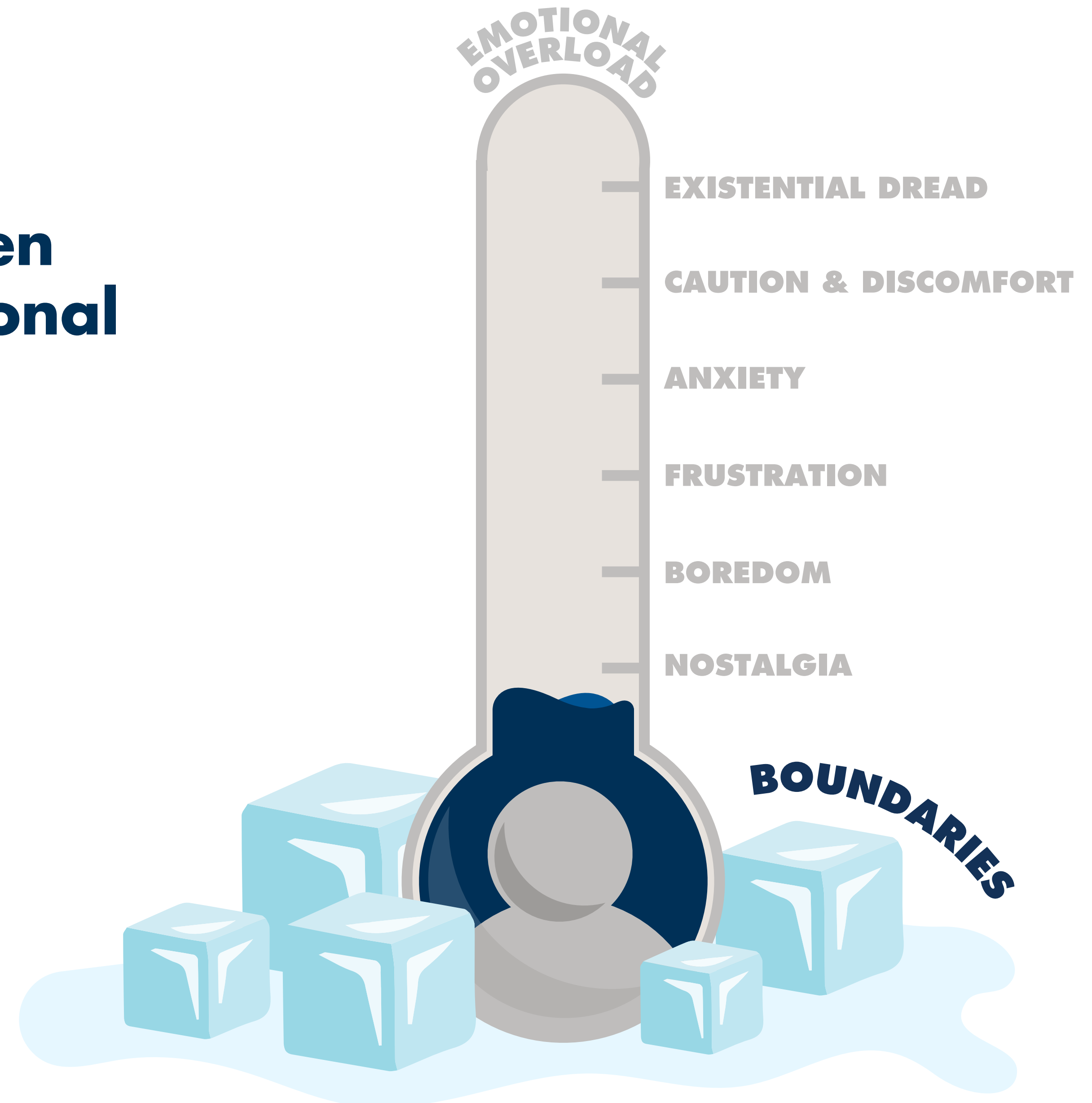
To stay sane and manage emotional overload, we create boundaries and other strategies to guide our interactions with others.



# The COVID-19 pandemic has been emotionally draining, but emotional boundaries help us stay sane

Emotional boundaries work in tandem with coping mechanisms and help us compartmentalize complex feelings. They create the foundation necessary to prioritize our own needs in these disruptive times and encourage us to be empathetic to the needs of others.

**These boundaries ultimately help us regain control over our lives; from planning social interactions to staying productive while working.**





# Collectively redrawing boundaries helps us maintain agency over our lives—but it is not an easy task

## RECOGNIZING AND ACCEPTING BOUNDARIES

People work to maintain **recognized boundaries**. We use these to guide our daily actions and experiences.

New boundaries may eventually become largely recognized and normalized. We use these new definitions to make sense of our new normal and navigate emotional, spatial, and temporal landscapes.

**Examples: Wearing a mask, 6 ft. social distancing**

## SHIFTING BOUNDARIES IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

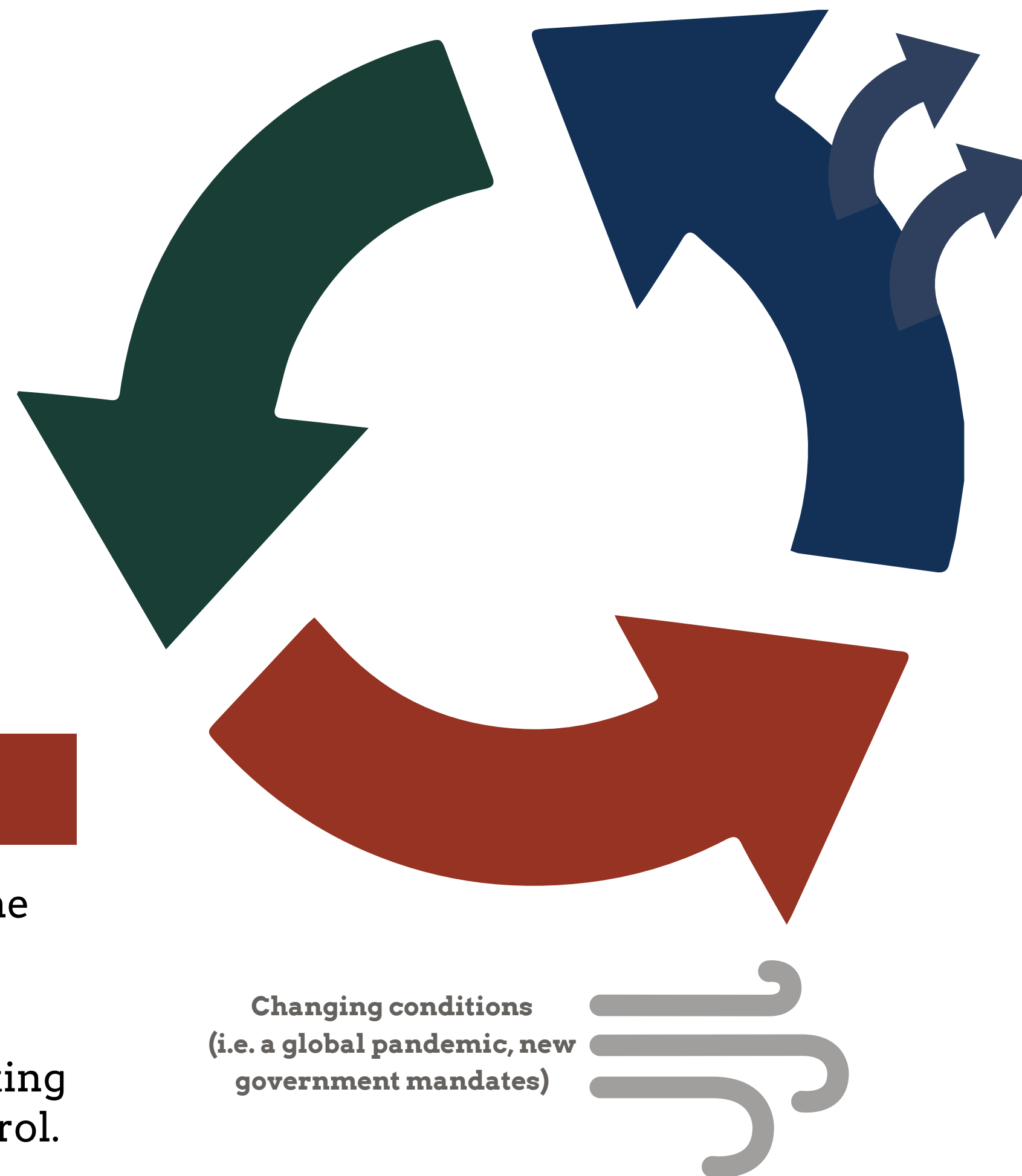
When our *normal* boundaries no longer fit the current world or situation, our world feels disrupted and uncertain.

**Constant** changes, new information, and shifting boundaries make us feel like we have no control.

## CREATING NEW BOUNDARIES IS HARD

Prompted by new rules and feelings of uncertainty, we work to redraw our spatial, emotional, and temporal boundaries. Creating new boundaries **helps us stay in control** and acts as a guide for interaction in a “new normal” world.

This is not an easy process. People may create different definitions and ideas for new boundaries. Misaligned boundaries **create uncertainty and discomfort** in public and private spaces as well as in relationships.



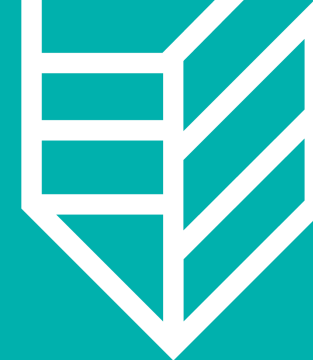
# Future boundaries are yet to be defined in a post-pandemic world

As cities and communities oscillate between re-opening and closing, a slow return to pre-pandemic normalcy seems far away. Long-term changes to our behavior and the societal effects of the boundaries we have created during the pandemic have yet to emerge.

In this new world, organizations can support individuals as they navigate the changing landscape of spatial, emotional, and temporal boundaries by asking...

- **Which boundaries do our products, services, and experiences** impact the most? How can we adapt?
- **What kinds of environments and contexts** test boundaries under pressure and lead to emotional overload?
- **What kinds of environments and contexts** invite and allow people to re-evaluate their boundaries?
- **What social signals do people look for** to identify changing boundaries?
- **Are there certain groups or circumstances** that require a unique set of boundaries?





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# PERSPECTIVE SHIFTING INSIGHTS

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