

Zoom Fatigue? What's that?

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented shift in lifestyles for us all. Not only are most of us working from home, but our social lives have suddenly moved into the virtual realm too.

Our days, once rich in daily face-to-face interactions and punctuated by moving from one place to another, whether floor-to-floor at work or around town, are now often spent in a succession of online meetings – on Skype, MS Teams, BlueJeans and ... Zoom, a novelty for many of us.

Things are getting truly hectic. On top of meeting more online, we are packing our days with more meetings than ever before. The end result is that the working day can feel incredibly intense. Add to that long hours spent on all sorts of chairs, with tables at the wrong height, and it's hardly surprising that fatigue creeps in.

If you are experiencing exhaustion from staring at your screen all day or feeling burnt out by excessive use of technology, you may be a victim of Zoom Fatigue.

While the term is yet to find its way into the literature, some psychologists say the condition has become all too common in the COVID-19 era.

Symptoms and risks of Zoom Fatigue

If you have been working at home and have noticed any of the following symptoms, you may be suffering from Zoom Fatigue and general overload:

- more exhausted than usual,
- emotionally drained and irritable,
- sore, dry eyes,
- back pain or throbbing headaches.

These are the easier symptoms to spot. Longer term, the risks include anxiety, burnout and depression, but you can avoid all this by sorting out appropriate workplace habits and tools.



Why do we find video calls so draining?

Various factors play a role here. Let's look at them in turn, to better understand the problem.

The physical challenge

Did you know that the seated position is not a natural human resting position? Sitting is a relatively new activity that started when chairs were invented. All round the world you see traditional cultures where people squat for hours at a time well into their old age. Funnily, they report little to no back problems.

Here's something for you: Sitting is the new smoking. Working at home without ergonomic office chairs intensifies the downsides of sitting, giving us back pain, headaches, painful feet and more. Add to that the fact of staring at a screen for prolonged periods resulting in computer vision syndrome and disruptions to our circadian rhythm.

The mental challenge

Prolonged screen time (incl. TVs and phones) forces our brains to process information differently. Jeremy Bailenson, the founding director of Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab, says: “There's nothing natural about a face hovering on a screen speaking to you as if you were right there in the room. Your brain isn't accustomed to so much direct eye contact –and faces are far closer than they ought to be, not to mention weirdly enlarged.”

Video chat meetings drain us more than in-person conversations, because they force us to focus more intently on conversations in order to absorb information. I knew an old lady who could cook, read and smoke at the same time – but her spaghetti bolognese sucked! That's the kind of multi-tasking your brain is trying, and often failing, to navigate in a group chat.

Psychologists call this continuous partial attention, and it applies as much to virtual environments as it does to real ones.

Since being on a video call requires more focus than a face-to-face chat, we need to work harder to process non-verbal cues, like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of our voice, and body language – paying more attention to these consumes a lot of energy. Our minds are together when our bodies feel we're not. That dissonance, which causes us to have conflicting feelings, is exhausting. We cannot relax into the conversation naturally. Add to that the expectation that speakers constantly stare into the camera to create the illusion of eye-contact and the whole video meeting becomes even more challenging for our brains.

Onscreen distractions add to the mix. On a call with five people, as well as seeing five faces, we may feel like we're in five different rooms at once. We can see their furniture, plants, and wallpaper. We might even strain to see what books they have on their shelves. The brain processes all of these visual environmental cues at the same time.

The socio-emotional challenge

Unless they're carefully crafted, virtual conversations can be more tiring than energizing. A famous [study by Mehrabian](#) suggested that 93% of our communication is non-verbal (facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, etc.). Video calls reduce us to a talking head, with connectivity issues exacerbating the problem by freezing or pixelating our image. We lose much of the subtext that makes normally our social interactions so rich. We are unaccustomed to making decisions without this subtext.

Silence is another challenge. Silence creates a natural rhythm in a real-life conversation. In a video call, silence can be disconcerting. One [2014 study](#) by German academics showed that delays on phone or conferencing systems shaped our views of people negatively: even delays of 1.2 seconds made people view the responder as less friendly or focused.

Last but not least, if we are physically on camera, we are acutely aware of being watched. We know that everybody's looking at us so there comes the social pressure and feeling like you need to perform. Being performative is nerve-racking and more stressful. It's also very hard for people not to look at their own face if they can see it on screen, or not to be conscious of how they behave in front of the camera.

The challenge of self

With no natural demarcation of the working day (no morning / evening commute) and calls almost all day long, the sense of self, the boundaries that allowed us to form our identity are disturbed, making it hard to be the best version of ourselves. This is akin to being alone on a desert island or in solitary confinement and losing track of time.

What can we do about Zoom Fatigue?

The secret lies in a single principle: recovery. We need to build in rituals and processes that let our body and mind recover from the stress – regularly, many times a day. It is the same principle that

works in physical training. A muscle is stretched through exercise and then allowed to recover before putting more pressure on it.



Practical Tips to Recover from or Prevent Zoom Fatigue

1. Reduce onscreen stimuli. Instead of gazing at your own face during a video call, try hiding yourself from view. You can also encourage people to use plain backgrounds.
2. Avoid multitasking. The next time you're on a video chat, close any tabs or programs that might distract you (e.g. Outlook inbox or Skype), put your phone away, and stay present. Though it's tempting, remind yourself that the last SMS that came in can wait 15 minutes and you'll craft a better response when you're not on a video chat.
3. Avoid defaulting to video. This is a very sensitive issue. Do be aware that we were all rained internally and required to keep our video on during almost every call to show that we are actively present and paying attention to the meeting. However, the situation now is different to what it was at the beginning of the pandemic. Lockdown restrictions are loosening and more and more offices are re-opening, which brings back possibilities of in-person meetings. This means we can alternate between online and face-to-face meetings, reducing the need to keep your video on every time we meet virtually. Whenever you are on a long video call, consider

agreeing with the participants that it's okay for everyone to turn off their cameras for parts of the call. When in doubt, just consult your supervisor.

4. Video calls only when strictly necessary. Switch to phone calls or email whenever possible. Check your calendar for the next few days to see if there are any conversations you could have over the phone or by email instead. In a one-on-one afternoon meeting, you can ask the person to switch to a phone call and say something like, "I'd love a break from video calls. Do you mind if we do this over the phone?" Most likely the other person will be relieved by the switch, too.
5. Make virtual social events opt-in. If you own the event, make it explicit that people are welcome, but not obliged, to join.
6. Build in breaks. Allow some buffer time between calls that you can use for your recovery rituals or at least try looking away from your computer completely for a few seconds now and then at something far away like the sky, birds, etc. For days when you can't avoid back-to-back calls, consider making meetings 25 or 50 minutes (not the standard 30 or 60) to give yourself time in between to get up and move around a bit.
7. Intersperse video calls with physical movement. Walk around the room, do sit-ups, stretch. Move at least once every hour and use this opportunity to stay hydrated.
8. You can also move about while speaking on the phone, which gives you a physical break from screen time.
9. Start online meetings with a check-in and ask people how they are rather than directly jumping into the task at hand. Similarly, ask questions as the group closes the conversation (called check-out) – Was the call useful? How do you feel? etc. Check-ins and check-outs are a good way to reconnect with the world, and to maintain trust and reduce fatigue and concern.
10. Try to demarcate a space at home where you will work. Leave other spaces free for normal everyday life. This will create certain boundaries for you with others at home as well and reduce the strain of distraction while working.

11. Try to sleep and wake at the same time every day and take regular breaks to mark the passing of the day. Finding a rhythm to your day helps your body and mind relax and deal with external stressors much better.
12. Find one thing to do every day that affirms your identity. For example, do what you like doing (dancing, cooking, jogging).
13. Make sure you have a good sitting posture. Sitting properly is essential for maintaining a healthy back and spine. Most people can improve their posture by following a few simple guidelines.
14. Try keeping a journal and noting down your mood and your physical, mental and emotional state. Whenever you notice mood swings or other alarming signals, try to take a break like perhaps a day off and pause to think what you can do to take care of yourself and recover.

These tips might not be easy to follow – bad habits form fast. But taking these steps can help you prevent feeling exhausted at the very thought of another video chat. Manage your video calls and make life a little easier for yourself!

These recommendations are good for those of you who need to continue working from home as well as for those who are returning to the office. Zooming with clients and colleagues will not go away, even if we move back to a higher level of office attendance.

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