

Zoom Fatigue

At the beginning of the pandemic, we had to adjust to Zoom and other forms of video conferencing. Because of dodgy Internet connections, getting our camera and audio to work, fiddling around with advanced settings to make music sound a bit better, and learning how engage with people through videoconferencing made for a pretty stressful time.

At some point we became more comfortable...and then the term “Zoom fatigue” began to appear. This refers to the tiredness, exhaustion, or feelings of burnout that many have described experiencing after video calls.

Is this really a thing and is there anything we can do about it.

So there now are some studies and I’m going to be referring to one by Jeremy Bailenson. He is a cognitive psychologist and the founder and director of Stanford University’s Virtual Human Interaction Lab. He recently published a paper suggesting that there are four factors at play: eye gaze, cognitive load, self-evaluation and physical constraints.

1) Excessive Eye Gaze Can Be Intense

You know how direct eye contact can be kind of uncomfortable? Especially if it’s too direct, and goes on for too long? Also the closer someone is to you, the less eye contact you tend to make. Like in a crowded elevator.

In online video calls, especially in Zoom Speaker View, the face staring back at us on our screen often appears to be “closer” to us than it would be in real life. Of course, it depends on the size of your screen, size of your Zoom window but typically it’s much closer than you would be to someone who isn’t a close family member. For most of us, a space less than 2 feet would be considered intimate.

Another consideration is that in a normal classroom or meeting setting, unless you’re the speaker, you typically just see the backs or sides of everyone’s heads. But in a group video chat, we see a bunch of other people staring back at us. And even though they may not actually be looking at us, it can *feel like* all eyes are on us.

2) The Cognitive Load Can Be Exhausting

Communicating by video conferencing takes more mental work.

If you’re speaking, audio and video can be laggy, so you may have to wait a few seconds to see what the participants’ reactions to your comment might be. Which makes “reading the room” more challenging.

You also have to worry about your lighting, being centered in the camera, and remembering to look at the webcam rather than the screen when talking. We tend to speak 15% louder when video chatting than in normal

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life (although in the case of my grandson, I swear it's more like 150% louder).

Furthermore, we only see people from the shoulders up, so we miss all the normal hand gestures and body language that would typically help with communication.

So in many ways, we're basically having to work harder to stay engaged and communicate effectively – when both speaking and listening.

With Zoom we have taken one of the most natural things in the world – an in-person conversation – and transformed it into something that involves a lot of thought: If you want to show someone that you are agreeing with them, you have to do an exaggerated nod or put your thumbs up or click on an emoji at the bottom of your screen. That adds cognitive load as you're using more mental calories.

Gestures could also mean different things in a video meeting context. A sidelong glance to someone during an in-person meeting means something very different than a person on a video chat grid looking off-screen to their child who just walked into their home office.

3) Continual Self-Evaluation Can Be Stressful

The default setting of most video chat software is for us to see ourselves as well as the other people. That's like walking around all day with a mirror in our face. Which apparently makes us more likely to engage in self-evaluation, adding even more stress.

4) Physical Constraints Tire Us Out

In a video call, you have to maintain a certain distance from the screen, make sure you stay in the frame, and you may have headphones on which further restricts your movement. All of which leaves us more physically constrained than in a regular classroom or meeting setting, where you can lean back, turn around, and move around a bit more, without other people noticing quite so much.

So, in fact, Zoom Fatigue is a real thing. Given all of this, is there anything we can do to make it better? Here are some suggestions.

Consider Turning Off Your Video

If you are just dealing with one or two people, sometimes a phone call or audio-only meeting might work better. You're free to move around, wave your arms and not worry so much about all of the visual issues we mentioned.

During long stretches of group meetings, give yourself an audio only break. This is not simply turning off your camera, but also turning away from the

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screen, getting up to stretch, so that for a few minutes you are not smothered with gestures that may be realistic but are socially meaningless. I'm now recommending that we do this as a regular part of our MUGOO meetings.

Having said that, for presentations or teaching, the visual feedback from the audience is valuable, and helps me know if I need to clarify something, slow down a bit, skip something, or tell a story. It's very tough presenting to a group if all cameras are turned off, like talking to yourself.

Consider Reducing the Size of Your Zoom Window

This can be accomplished by exiting full screen mode, and reducing the size of the Zoom window relative to your monitor, particularly in Speaker View. The idea is to reduce the size of the face in front of you so you don't feel like your personal space is being invaded. With the same goal, an external keyboard can allow an increase in the personal space bubble between yourself and the Zoom window as opposed to touching an iPad or iPhone screen.

Try Using Gallery View.

Talking postage stamps are less likely to make you feel like someone is invading your space. When someone's face is close to ours in real life, our brains interpret it as an intense situation that is either going to lead to mating or conflict. When you use Zoom for many hours you can be continually in this hyperactive state, which is exhausting.

Consider Hiding Self View

In the real world, if someone was following you around with a mirror, so that while you were talking to people, making decisions, receiving feedback, you are always seeing yourself in this mirror, it would drive you crazy. And it's stressful and we tend to be more critical of ourselves.

It can be quite freeing to just engage in a Zoom session, and not think about making my eye contact, lighting, or how you appear on camera.

Zoom has a feature so you only see the other people on the call, not yourself, but they continue to see you. Once you have confirmed that you are centred, hair brushed, look ok, then click on the three dots in the upper right corner of your video and enable the option *hide self-view*. There are several YouTube videos that show how to do this, but it's pretty straight forward. This feature only works on a computer and not an iPad or iPhone.

It's even worth mentioning this capability to others in your session, so they are less self-conscious about how they appear.

Give Yourself More Space and Flexibility

There's growing research that says when people are moving, they're performing better cognitively.

Think more about the room you are videoconferencing in, where the camera is positioned and whether things like an external keyboard or wireless headset can help create distance or flexibility. For example, an external camera farther away from the screen will allow you to pace and doodle in virtual meetings just like we do in real ones. And as mentioned, turning one's video off periodically during meetings is a good ground rule to set for groups, just to give everyone a brief nonverbal rest.

How Does Your Zoom Fatigue Compare to Others

Bailenson has developed a **Zoom Exhaustion & Fatigue Scale** to help measure how much fatigue people are experiencing in the workplace from videoconferencing.

It asks questions about a person's general fatigue, physical fatigue, social fatigue, emotional fatigue and motivational fatigue. Some sample questions include:

- How exhausted do you feel after videoconferencing?
- How irritated do your eyes feel after videoconferencing?
- How much do you tend to avoid social situations after videoconferencing?
- How emotionally drained do you feel after videoconferencing?
- How often do you feel too tired to do other things after videoconferencing?

If you would like to add to the body of research on Zoom Fatigue, there is a short form survey available from from Bailenson at Stanford.

https://stanforduniversity.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5w2JruIAQzOgiTI

References

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