

https://thriveglobal.com/stories/how-to-avoid-zoom-fatigue-while-working-from-home/?utm_source=Newsletter_General&utm_medium=Thrive

How to Avoid Zoom Fatigue While Working from Home

If your day is dominated by back-to-back video conferences, these strategies can help you set the boundaries you need to avoid burnout.

By

- Sweta Bothra, Lead Therapist at InnerHour, a Mental Health Platform



Shutterstock

The global pandemic has caused a massive shift in how most people live their lives. Schools and universities have postponed or cancelled examinations, employees have started to work from home, and social distancing has become the norm. As a result of these abrupt changes and strict restrictions, in-person interactions have come to a grinding halt.

Understandably, the situation has led to the rise of video calls. After all, video calls allow us to hear and see other people – and this is the closest we can get to face-to-face interactions at this time. Virtual dinners, family nights, catch-ups, and game nights are now possible thanks to video-conferencing platforms like WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, Google Meet and FaceTime. Even at the workplace, video calls have become a necessity. Meetings, conferences, brainstorming sessions, daily stand ups and even company-wide informal hangouts are all taking place through the medium of video calls.

While video calls have made our lives easy and convenient, they are not without their disadvantages.

The downside of video calls

They require more focus

According to researchers, being on a video call requires more focus than in-person interactions. Your brain needs to put in more effort to process and understand non-verbal cues like facial expressions, body language, and tone or pitch of the voice. This gets worse when the video call involves more than two people. Over time, video calls can make you feel mentally drained or exhausted.

They require multitasking

When you talk to multiple people on the same video call, your mind rapidly shifts focus from one person to another, each of whom may have a different background. Your brain's central vision gets challenged as it has to process all the people at the same time and may not be able to focus on the speaker. This causes you to constantly pay partial attention to each person, and you may end up multitasking. This can hamper productivity and can also cause you to tire out.

They cause dissonance and distress

The human mind understands the importance of having other people around and to some degree enjoys interpersonal interactions. When your mind sees and hears other people, but realises they are not physically present there, it can cause a sense of dissonance or disconnection. This disconnect can be jarring to deal with and difficult to adapt to – and can eventually lead to high levels of stress.

They put pressure to behave a certain way

It is easier to look around and maintain eye contact with others in a face-to-face setting. However, during a video call, it becomes difficult to display natural body language. Looking off to a side, trying to read the time, or even taking notes can be interpreted as you not paying attention. This puts a lot of pressure on individuals to behave a certain way – by sitting straight or focussing solely on the person who is talking, for example. Dealing with this pressure can be tiring and draining.

They can make us self-conscious

When people are on a video call, everyone's attention is on the speaker. If you are the speaker, this can make you hyper-aware of how you are looking and can even cause you to worry about your appearance. You may become preoccupied with your "flaws" and may be concerned about these flaws becoming more apparent through the camera lens. This can then cause high levels of anxiety.

They cause physical strain

When you constantly sit in the same position and stare at a screen for a long time, it puts a strain on your entire body. Your shoulders, neck, and back may hurt. You may start experiencing headaches and your eyes may water or feel strained. This can make the experience of video calls even more tiring and difficult.

As a result of the factors mentioned above, people are at risk of what is now called “video call burnout”. This is a phenomenon in which one experiences anxiety, tension, fatigue, and exhaustion due to frequent high-intensity virtual interactions. Video call burnout is more commonly reported in the work sphere, but it can be experienced due to non-work calls too. People experiencing video call burnout may:

- Feel demotivated to show up for video calls
- Feel frustrated at the thought of getting on video calls
- Believe that video calls are useless or don't add value
- Avoid video calls as far as possible
- Find it hard to focus or concentrate

The consequences of feeling burnt out with video calls can spill over onto other aspects of the person's life as well. If not addressed in time, this state of burnout can become more global and can lead to:

- A lack of interest to do anything
- A cynical and pessimistic attitude towards things
- Difficulty in focusing and remembering information
- Constant negative thoughts about oneself, others, and the future
- Low levels of life satisfaction

If any of these signs seem familiar to you, it is highly possible that you may be feeling burnt out. If this is the case, there are a few things you can do to take care of yourself.

Strategies to manage video call burnout

Before the call begins

- **Arrange a space:** Designate a space in your home for video calls – and take all calls from this defined space. Having a separate space for video calls will prepare you for them mentally and can even make you more productive during these calls.
- **Set boundaries:** Make sure your roommates and family members are aware that you are going to be on a call, and request them not to interrupt you. This can help you focus during the call and can make the process less stressful for you.
- **Use time blocking:** You can schedule a few hours specifically for video calls and try to have calls only at this time. This can help you mentally prepare for video calls in the scheduled slot, and can also give you a few hours each day that are entirely free of video calls.
- **Switch devices:** If possible, use your phone rather than your laptop. This will give you the freedom to walk around and/or move your body while you are on call. This can then reduce the physical strain of video calls on your body.

- Check if the video call is necessary: Define an agenda for a scheduled video call. Ask others to note down what they want out of the call. If the agenda can easily be discussed via emails or text messages, avoid having the video call altogether.

During the call

- Break the ice: Start your call by greeting every person and having a few minutes of small talk. This can help ease the tension and can create a connection amongst everyone who is on call.
- Keep distractions away: Build a habit of single-tasking. Avoid responding to emails, talking to others, playing games or getting other work done while you are on call. This will help you avoid multitasking and can lessen the mental load of the video call.
- Use earphones: Try using headphones or earphones during your call instead of relying on your phone or laptop's inbuilt mic. This will prevent ambient sounds – such as traffic noise, the whirring of the fan, or other background sounds – from disrupting the call.
- Use pen and paper: During work-related video calls, take down notes by hand. This will push you to pay attention to what is being said. Making physical notes can also improve your retention of what was discussed in the conversation.
- Do the call without video: If you feel anxious or uncomfortable in front of the camera, switch off your video. However, be proactive in letting others know about this decision and also be flexible enough to switch on the video when it is absolutely required.

After the call ends

- Cool down: Take a break after a call is done in order to allow yourself time to unwind from the constant digital stimulation. Take a few deep breaths and have a glass of water. Stay away from gadgets and the internet at this time.
- Get moving: Do a few light stretches and splash some water on your face and eyes once your call ends. The stretches can help combat the physical strain of video calls and the water can help your eyes feel cool after looking at a screen for long.
- Shift to a different space: Help yourself fully unwind after a video call is done by moving to another space. If you can't shift to another space, change the lighting in your room or sit in a different position.
- Go offline: If you can, follow up a video call with in-person interaction of some kind. Speak to your partner, kids, roommates, parents, or even just play with your pets for some time. If you live alone, you could spend some time in nature or pick up a good book to read.

For better or for worse, video calls are a part of the new normal. While these calls can be difficult and tiring, they can also provide us with some much-needed social contact. If the constant stream of virtual interactions is getting to you, or you find yourself feeling burnt out, know that you can take action to feel better. With the strategies mentioned above, you can keep a check on your stress levels while making the most of what video calls have to offer.

References:

Fosslien, L., & Duffy, M. W. (2020, April 29). How to Combat Zoom Fatigue. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>

Hines, A., & Sun, P. (n.d.). Zoom fatigue: how to make video calls less tiring. The Conversation. Retrieved June 16, 2020, from <https://theconversation.com/zoom-fatigue-how-to-make-video-calls-less-tiring-137861>

Jiang, M. (n.d.). The reason Zoom calls drain your energy. Wwww.Bbc.Com. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting>

Murthy, R. S. (2009). Understanding burnout. Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 51(2), 165–166. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2755154/>

Zoom Exhaustion is Real. Here Are Six Ways to Find Balance and Stay Connected. (2020, April 6). Mindful. <https://www.mindful.org/zoom-exhaustion-is-real-here-are-six-ways-to-find-balance-and-stay-connected/>

Zoom Fatigue: Don't Let Video Meetings Zap Your Energy. (n.d.). Psychology Today. Retrieved June 16, 2020, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/lifetime-connections/202004/zoom-fatigue-dont-let-video-meetings-zap-your-energy>

'Zoom fatigue' is taxing the brain. Here's why that happens. (2020, April 24). Science. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/>
— Published on July 20, 2020