Zoom[1] Fatigue

why we experience it and how to mitigate it

Video conferencing has kept thousands of organisations working effectively over the past twelve months. Geographical boundaries have melted as we interact with colleagues and meeting virtually is the new norm. But for good reasons, the form of these virtual connections can leave us feeling drained and unproductive. This has been coined 'Zoom Fatigue' and a year into the working from home phenomenon it's becoming increasingly prevalent.

Why are we experiencing Zoom Fatigue?

There are several psychological reasons for this phenomenon.

Virtual conversation requires intense focus which consumes more energy. We rely heavily on non-verbal cues like facial expressions, voice pitch, body language, and sensing emotion. A typical video call impairs our natural ability to decode and contextualise our interactions prompting our brain to work overtime to fill in the gaps. This takes cognitive energy and is immensely draining. Throw in awkward sound delays, Wi-Fi drop out, talking over each other (because we can't read those social cues, or due to the 1.2 second delay) and the whole experience can become exhausting.

When faces fill the screen we get virtually closer with people than we generally would in person. Not only does our primal brain find this threatening but a plethora of eyes staring at you creates a feeling of being on stage and a compulsion to perform which can be stressful and nerve-wracking.

Meetings at the office feel more 'spacious' and we might look out the window, or down at a notebook or laptop. Online, there is a sense that we need to be 100% attentive as looking away from the screen is more obvious and can appear disinterested.

Lines blur as we use Zoom for social and work purposes, so we never digitally switch off. We find ourselves jumping from one virtual team meeting to a 'fun' Zoom catch-up with friends. No clear break between work and play is overwhelming and our brains need a screen break.

Finally, we may be factoring in the challenge of how to keep the kids/dog occupied for the duration of the call and ensuring that we're on/off mute at the right time.

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[1] Other (equally fatiguing) video conferencing options are available!

How do we mitigate this?

1. We can be clear on the value of a video call and not feel obliged to Zoom if a one-to-one conversation can occur by phone or using audio only. Zoom may be unavoidable when there is a need for team buy-in and engagement, or need to share screens. It may also be preferable when meeting someone for the first time. Yet, many of us are over-using the technology, in an attempt to 'stay connected' that is backfiring. For bonus benefits, we can try a walking meeting on the phone to inject energy, improve creativity and reduce stress.

2. Virtual meetings are prone to distraction so we should try to avoid the temptation to multi-task by closing other tabs, putting phones away and staying focused in the moment. It's far more effective than jumping between all the other 'interesting' or 'important' activities.

3. We can also avoid distraction by hiding the video window of ourselves from view. It is unnatural to interact with others whilst 'staring in a mirror' and human nature to be self-conscious about one's appearance.

4. We can use the text 'chat' function to indicate support, approval, add small asides. This extra layer of casual interaction can help foster a more friendly and natural meeting experience.

5. If we avoid back-to-back Zoom meetings it gives our brains time to reset. It can help to default to meetings that are 20, 50, 80 minutes long that allow 10-minute breaks to walk away from the screen to recharge.

To support others

It is worthwhile checking our Zoom set-up for the sake of others on our calls. It is not vain or self-centred to consider how we look on camera. There's no need to put on a show, but the more we look as if we would when meeting face to face, the more relaxed others will be. Suggestions:

- Lighting: Don't sit in the shadows, that's shady behaviour that is quite disturbing to the primal brain. Face the window head-on to take advantage of natural light or use a lamp angled towards your face.
- Height: Set the camera at eye level, nobody wants the feeling of 'being looked down on' or to see up your nose!
- Framing: Position yourself so your shoulders are in the frame. If meeting in real life you wouldn't sit so close so that others can only see your face, that would be intimidating.
- Adjust Settings on Zoom: Explore the Zoom settings to adjust the lighting and there is even a 'touch up my appearance' filter which adds a little blur for a soft-focus effect (okay maybe that one is a bit vain but hey if it helps our confidence, why not?!)
- Background: For that big meeting, declutter your background and wear solid colours as patterns can be distracting and look fuzzy on camera.

It's a conversation

This is a great conversation to have with our teams, yes probably over Zoom… It's important to strike the right balance across the organisation and respect that an approach that works well for one may not for another. Through regular conversation and review, we have the greatest chance of finding the communication norms that best energise our people, so they are enthused and productive rather than stressed, exhausted and ready for bed.