

Zoom fatigue is real!

Dale O. Ritzel

‘Zoom fatigue’ is real and we’ll see a return to in-person events as soon as it’s safe! During April, the number of meeting participants using the video conferencing app, Zoom grew by 50% to 300 million daily log-ins. That’s 100 million more online delegates than the previous month, forced to switch from physical to digital meeting interactions due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Although all this extra screen-time has been a necessity for maintaining activity during COVID-19 stay at home and lockdown, it has resulted in some surprising psychological effects.

Much has been learned about Zoom and similar conferencing technologies. Zoom has updated the product monthly and even bimonthly as business leaders, educators, and churches at all levels used the technology. It continues to improve. Zoom was so ubiquitous at the beginning of the COVID pandemic that is on its way to becoming an eponym, joining a long list of trademarked products and technologies that represent an entire field. However, while we use the term generically, several very powerful alternatives have emerged.

Those of us who do several daily Zoom, Cisco Webex, Microsoft Team, Google Hangouts, Google Meet, WhatsApp or FaceTime meetings, often experience increased fatigue and may become moody and depressed.

The crucible of massive use of these technologies by less experienced supervisors, business managers and other users at all levels has exposed vulnerabilities and a host of less-than-optimum uses of online conferencing.

Zoom fatigue is a recognized condition. The popular media has picked up on this phenomenon worldwide. Some have suggested that the micro-delays in audio and the extended focus on lower-resolution, poorly illuminated portrait images of participants contribute to fatigue. Almost certainly, there are a variety of such factors that contribute to the fatigue.

In “A Neuropsychological Exploration of Zoom Fatigue,” Dr. Jenna Lee of the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine and the UCLA Mattel Children’s Hospital writes, “The contributing factors, depending on their adjustability, serve as potential therapeutic targets to alleviate fatigue and salvage the aspects of social interaction that were once unconscious and taken for granted. Exploring alternative and more explicit ways to improve perceived reward psychologically during virtual communication may be a therapeutic approach for not only Zoom fatigue, but the mental and physical toll that comes with it.”

Dr. Jeffrey Hall, author of “Relating Through Technology,” is quoted in *Psychology Today* as explaining Zoom fatigue as a very real phenomenon. “Zoom is exhausting and lonely because you have to be so much more attentive and so much more aware of what’s

going on than you do on phone calls.” If you haven’t turned off your own camera, you are also watching yourself speak, which can be arousing and disconcerting. The blips, delays and cut off sentences also create confusion. Much more exploration needs to be done, but he says, “maybe this isn’t the solution to our problems that we thought it might have been.” Phone calls, by comparison, are less demanding. “You can be in your own space. You can take a walk, make dinner,” Hall says. Hall is not the only expert suggesting that wherever possible you revert to audio-only or text media to communicate. Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy in *Harvard Business Review* suggest several recommendations to alleviate fatigue, including more breaks, reducing multitasking and other online stimuli, as well as switching to audio phone calls or email.

But psychologists have also identified other factors which differentiate meeting online from meeting in a physical environment.

What is meeting virtually doing to our brains?

Factors identified by psychologists include:

- Our brains need to work harder during a video call to consciously process non-verbal cues like facial expressions and tone-of-voice. This results in increased tiredness.
- The confinement anxiety of conducting our work lives and social lives in the same small virtual space can lead to unconscious increases in stress.
- The intensity of seeing all our own facial expressions played out on the screen in front of us can build insecurity and fear for how we’re perceived by others.

In addition, frustration with lagging connections, background noise, and whether or not to have our cameras turned off or to be on mute, can also be associated with a heightened sense of stress and fatigue.

How does this compare with meeting in-person?

In contrast, when we meet ‘in person’ we process nonverbal signals automatically in order to make sub-conscious evaluations of someone’s credibility, trustworthiness or friendliness. That leaves our brains to fully concentrate on what we’re being told by the speaker on stage or by the person in the meeting.

In a conference environment, delegates move around from the plenary hall to break-out rooms, exhibition areas and coffee lounges. This simple act of relocating to a different room is energizing. It improves creative thinking and it presents more opportunities to speak with other people and to vary our own social behaviors.

Behavioral variations result in a wider range of emotional responses, which are ultimately key to influencing decision-making.

If every leadership decision had to be taken following the same formulaic video conferencing call, that person's decision-making would quickly become impeded by the dilution of those emotions more keenly felt in a face-to-face physical environment – namely empathy, engagement and social connection.

Ways to overcome 'Zoom Fatigue'

These cognitive differences in how we meet in the physical world compared with how we're currently meeting in the virtual world are key to understanding why in-person organized events will return. But, the learning curves that have been sharply thrust upon us actually leave us in a good position to put both in-person and virtual events together, resulting in hybrid events.

Though 'zoom fatigue' is a problem, it is not one that cannot be overcome by mixing good event organization practices with this new world of virtual events. Engagement tools such as mobile apps, polls, and surveys can re-energize attendees at points when the conversation is dwindling or can simply help to keep attendees connected with one another.

That benefit of moving from room to room can still be achieved by utilizing breakout rooms along with a bit of willingness. Why not try using the Zoom functionality to move your attendees into breakout rooms and encourage them to actually move physical rooms if they can. From the dining room desk to the living room couch or the kitchen worktop. Or work time in to simply allow everyone to make a cup of tea and come back to the table.

A return to in-person events is required.

We know that nothing beats an in-person event. But with some great tools and out of the box thinking you can shake up your virtual meetings too and try to limit the amount of 'zoom fatigue' your attendees may suffer.

Though we are confident in-person events will return, how much activity returns is a different matter, since social distancing and digital hybrid elements will certainly have important roles to play.

However, the importance of physical communication to build human connections, address sensitive issues, gather feedback, plus enhance credibility and trust, will ensure that live 'in-person' events are very much a part of our future. We simply need to journey this road together and try not to become too fatigued by all those Zoom calls along the way.