

Zoom Fatigue and How to Deal with It*

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Many years ago, there was a commercial by Mazda for their new SUV called the Tribute. Many of you may remember the theme of this new car and for Mazda at the time was Zoom, Zoom, Zoom. Fast forward about 30 years and today we think of a different platform when we talk about Zoom. The COVID pandemic has introduced us to an app that allows us to connect with one another socially at a safe distance.

If you find yourself drained at the end of a day of ZOOMing, you join many people who have had a day looking at their computers.

Rev. Steven Sutterer, member of your Ministerial Health Commission, offers some deeper insights as to why this might be and some suggestions for how to manage it.

More and more people are searching online to find out why they are so tired after the end of their workday. We moved to using a video app because we could not get together physically. Many of you may have gone to Zoom for confirmation, church meetings, counseling appointments, even to have Circuit or District meetings. It was a good way of connecting, even though we could not get together as much. At least you felt like you could see someone and have a conversation.

So why is it we find video calls so draining? There are several reasons. In part, it is because they force us to focus more intently on conversations in order to absorb information. In a meeting you can ask the person next to you to help you remember something. In Zoom calls, you are not able to do that without using the private chat features or stopping the whole situation and ask for a repeat. That can be awkward and not easy to do.

The situation is harder because video calls can help us lose focus. There are times I think that I can simultaneously email a co-worker, talk to my family on the phone, and even research an article about Zoom. At that point I have lost focus over what we have been talking about in the first place in the video (Guilty for a bit earlier today 😊). And if we are working from home, well you may have issues with family members interrupting your space. And if you do not have a private workspace, well then it is incredibly challenging to get much of anything done.

Finally, “Zoom Fatigue” stems from how we process information over video. On a video call the only way to show we are paying attention is to look at the camera. But, in real life, how often do you stand within three feet of a colleague and stare at their face? Probably never. This is because having to engage in a “constant gaze” makes us uncomfortable – and tired.

Are we doomed with Zoom? Lest everything sound so doom and gloomy, we have a few ways to help you cope with Zoom and not stay feeling worn out.

1) First of all, avoid multitasking. It is all too easy to be at your desk and on a call, trying to send an email, file a report, or read your sermon. It is easy to think that you can use the opportunity to do more in less time, but research shows that trying to do multiple things at once cuts into performance. Because you have to turn certain parts of your brain off and on for different types of work, switching between tasks can cost you as much as 40 percent of your productive time.

2) Build in breaks. It is important to take mini breaks. Minimize your window and leave for a few minutes. If I am doing back-to-back Zoom meetings, I make sure that I take a few moments to get up and leave. One of the good things about Zoom is the ability to have several meetings in a row. My boss has started to tell me that he has so many back-to-back meetings, he cannot remember what his last meeting often is about as he does not get a break. So, one of the bad things about Zoom meetings is having meetings scheduled consecutively with no breaks in between. So, take a bathroom break, stretch in your space, get a cup of coffee or drink. You need to have breaks.

And if you find you have too many Zoom meetings, try and cut the length to 25-30 minutes instead of hour-long meetings.

3) Reduce on-screen stimuli. Research shows that when you are on video, you tend to spend the most time gazing at your own face. This can be easily avoided by hiding yourself from view. Still, onscreen distractions go far beyond yourself. You may be surprised to learn that on video, we not only focus on other's faces, but on their backgrounds as well. If you are on a call with five people, you may feel like you are in five different rooms at once. The brain has to process all of these visual environmental cues at the same time. To combat mental fatigue, encourage people to use plain backgrounds (e.g., a poster of a peaceful beach scene), or agree as a group to have everyone who is not talking turn off their video.

4) Make virtual social events optional. After a long day of back-to-back video calls, it is normal to feel drained, particularly if you are an introvert. That is why virtual social sessions should be kept opt-in, meaning whoever owns the event makes it explicit that people are welcome, but not obligated, to join. Maybe appoint a facilitator for a larger group. They can ask a question and even set an order for who speaks. Setting expectations for a meeting makes it easier for people to decide whether to talk or not.

5) Switch to phone calls or email. Check your calendar for the next few days to see if there are any conversations you could have over Slack or email instead. If 4 PM rolls around and you are Zoomed-out but have an upcoming one-on-one, ask the person to switch to a phone call or suggest picking up the conversation later so you can both recharge.

6) For external calls, avoid defaulting to video, especially if you do not know each other well. Many people now feel a tendency to treat video as the default for all communication. In situations where you are communicating with people outside of your organization (clients, vendors, networking, etc.) – conversations for which you used to rely on phone calls – you may feel obligated to send out a Zoom link instead. But a video call is fairly intimate and can even feel invasive in some situations.

Hopefully, these thoughts can be of help to make Zoom time a productive time and also help you to reduce the tiredness from too much Zooming.

*Many of these thoughts come out of reading you can do online.