ONLINE MEETING FATIGUE

For some, the increased use of digital mediums has also increased the amount of time engaging with others virtually. For those working more in isolation, virtual platforms provide some relief, however the significant increase in the amount of time using these platforms can prove tiring.

WHAT IS ‘ONLINE MEETING FATIGUE’?

“Our minds are together when our bodies feel we’re not. That dissonance... is exhausting. You cannot relax into the conversation naturally.”

Gianpiero Petriglieri, Associate Professor, INSEAD

For those who have moved into a virtual working environment, some have experienced burnout relating to the number of videocalls each day. During these calls our self-awareness is heightened, and we cannot rely on and respond to the usual non-verbal cues of others. Changing the nature of how we interact has required us to adapt our expectations and behaviours, which has been a rapid and concentrated process. When we consider additional stressors, like technological glitches, we can be forgiven for wanting to take a (long) break from our screens.
WHY IS IT DIFFERENT IN A VIRTUAL MEETING?

DECIPHERING OTHERS

Social fatigue can be caused by high intensity virtual connecting. Humans have evolved to perceive cues and react accordingly, a process which takes relatively little effort. However, during video calls we focus extra attentional effort on available non-verbal cues, like facial expressions, because these are fewer and more difficult to pick up on in virtual environments. In larger screen meetings, it is more difficult to decode multiple faces at once.

SELF-AWARENESS

Not only are we being challenged by the need to decipher the faces and information presented to us by others; we are also hyper-aware that our expressions and movements are being interpreted, because we are able to see ourselves. During a face to face meeting, we can look at our notes or briefly glance out the window while paying attention to the person talking. On video, these movements can imply that we are not listening or are distracted, so we try even harder to show that we are paying attention.

MULTITASKING

During virtual meetings, there is a temptation to simultaneously work on another task or reply to an email. As we can also be distracted by non-work-related disturbances (i.e family members and pets) in our home office, this further split in our attention may sometimes mean that we are not focusing on either activity to our full capacity.

WORK/HOME BALANCE

When working from home, we no longer have the daily commute to transition from our work personas into our personal, social selves. Blurring the line between work and home, we might be working and eating dinner at the same dining table. Similarly, we are relying on virtual technologies for both professional communication and personal connection. Our use of these platforms as an exclusive substitute for in-person interaction can start to feel monotonous and tiring.

On top of the extra effort, split attention and difficulty finding balance, frequent video calls serve as a constant reminder of how our ability to interact the way we normally would has been limited. When we see faces on our screens, we are acknowledging our social isolation and how life has changed. So, how can we be more effective in being (physically) disconnected yet (virtually) connected?
MITIGATING ‘ONLINE MEETING FATIGUE’

It is important for us to acknowledge that the tools we are currently using to connect are better than absence, but not quite as resonant as presence\(^6\). These five tips can help to ease performance pressure, increase presence during meetings, and decrease the likelihood of exhaustion:

1. LIMIT THE NUMBER OF VIDEO CALLS\(^7\)

Take time to consider whether you need to see your colleagues, or a phone call or email would be as effective. Being seen can help build a sense of engagement and connection. However, providing alternatives for those who have attended multiple video calls, such as dialling in via phone or only switching their camera on when they are speaking, will help foster trust and decrease the likelihood of frequent ‘check-ins’ beginning to feel like ‘check-ups’\(^8\). Where possible, you should try to schedule a two-hour block where no meetings take place, to give yourself some deep-thinking time.

2. CHOOSE SPEAKER VIEW\(^9\)

While it is nice to see our colleagues’ faces, splitting our attention between numerous thumbnails is tiring. Once the meeting has begun, switch to speaker view to focus your attention on the person delivering information. This will remove the additional unusual distraction of being able to constantly see your own image. As an alternative, most platforms allow you to hide the view of yourself.

3. RESIST THE URGE TO MULTITASK

Focusing our energy on the person speaking, rather than the many other tasks we could complete without anyone knowing, will mean that we absorb more information and feel less worn out when the meeting ends\(^10\).

4. BUILD IN BREAKS

In an office setting, to get from one meeting to another we might need to walk to a different room. This time allows us to resettle and move our attention to the next discussion, and these breaks are just as important in our new virtual environments. To ensure time to transition, set meeting invitations for 45 minutes, rather than an hour\(^11\).

5. SET LIMITATIONS

Many of us are using digital mediums for professional and personal interactions, further blurring the boundary between our work and social lives. Try setting a ‘no online meeting’ hour/s after the workday to allow yourself time to transition from ‘work me’ to ‘home me’. This will enable you to utilise the third space to reflect, rest and reset.
Virtual platforms have allowed a certain level of social connection. However, it is important to acknowledge our own limitations when it comes to rapidly adapting to new forms of interaction. Developing ways of working and setting expectations that are kind and achievable will help us all to navigate these uncertain times together.

**IN-TEXT CITATION**


**REFERENCES**


