Wellness Bulletin
Digital Wellness

Nonverbal Overload: Video Conferencing Fatigue and Solutions

Even as more people are logging onto popular video chat platforms to connect with colleagues, family and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic, Stanford researchers have a warning for you: **Those video calls are likely tiring you out.**

Prompted by the recent boom in videoconferencing, communication Professor Jeremy Bailenson, examined the psychological consequences of spending hours per day on these platforms. Virtual meetings have skyrocketed, with hundreds of millions happening daily, as social distancing protocols have kept people apart physically.

Bailenson has identified four consequences of prolonged video chats that he says contribute to the feeling commonly known as "Zoom fatigue." Bailenson stressed that his goal is not to vilify any particular videoconferencing platform - he appreciates and uses tools like Zoom regularly - but to highlight how current implementation of videoconferencing technologies are exhausting and to suggest interface changes, many of which are simple to implement. Moreover, he provides suggestions for consumers and organizations on how to leverage the current features on videoconferences to decrease fatigue.

Four primary reasons why video chats fatigue humans according to research:

1) Close Up Gaze: Excessive amounts of close-up eye contact is highly intense.

Both the amount of eye contact we engage in on video chats, as well as the size of faces on screens is unnatural.

In a normal meeting, people will variously be looking at the speaker, taking notes or looking elsewhere. But, on Zoom calls, everyone is looking at everyone, all the time. A listener is treated nonverballs like a speaker, so even if you don't speak once in a meeting, you are still looking at faces staring at you. The amount of eye contact is dramatically increased. "Social anxiety of public speaking is one of the biggest phobias that exists in our population," Bailenson said. "When you're standing up there and everyone is staring at you, that's a stressful experience."

Another source of stress is that, depending on your monitor size and whether you're using an external monitor, faces on videoconferencing calls can appear too large for comfort. "In general, for most setups, if it's one-on-one conversation when you're with coworkers or even strangers on video, you're seeing their face at a size which simulates a personal space that you normally experience when you're with somebody intimately," Bailenson said.

When someone's face is that close to ours in real life, our brains interpret it as an intense situation that is either going to lead to mating or to conflict. "What's happening, in effect, when you're using Zoom for many, many hours is you're in this hyper-aroused state," Bailenson said.

Solution: Until the platforms change their interface, Bailenson recommends taking Zoom out of the full-screen option and reducing the size of the Zoom window relative to the monitor to minimize face size, and to use an external keyboard to allow an increase in the personal space bubble between oneself and the grid.

2) Excessive View of Self: Seeing yourself during video chats constantly in real-time is fatiguing.

Most video platforms show a square of what you look like on camera during a chat. But, that's unnatural, Bailenson states, "In the real world, if somebody was following you around with a mirror constantly - so that while you were talking to people, making decisions, giving feedback, getting feedback - you were seeing yourself in a mirror, that would just be crazy. No one would ever consider that," he added.

Bailenson cited studies showing that when you see a reflection of yourself, you are more critical of yourself. Many of us are now seeing ourselves on video chats for many hours every day. "It's taxing on us. It's stressful. And there's lots of research showing that there are negative emotional consequences to seeing yourself in a mirror."

Solution: Bailenson recommends that platforms change the default practice of beaming the video to both self and others, when it only needs to be sent to others. In the meantime, users should use the "hide self-view" button, which one can access by right-clicking their own photo, once they see their face is framed properly in the video.

3) Restricted Mobility: Video chats dramatically reduce our usual mobility.

In-person and audio phone conversations allow humans to walk around and move. But, with videoconferencing, most cameras have a set field of view, meaning a person has to generally stay in the same spot. Movement is limited in ways that are not natural. "There's a growing research now that says when people are moving, they're performing better cognitively," Bailenson said.

Solution: Bailenson recommends people think about the room they're videoconferencing in, where the camera is positioned and whether things like an external keyboard to help create distance or flexibility. For example, an external camera farther away from the screen will allow you to pace and doodle in virtual meetings just like we do in real ones. And of course, turning one's video off periodically during meetings is a good ground rule to set for groups, just to give oneself a brief nonverbal rest.

4) Increased Cognitive Load: The cognitive load is much higher in video chats.

Bailenson notes that in regular face-to-face interaction, nonverbal communication is quite natural and each of us naturally makes and interprets gestures and nonverbal cues subconsciously. But in video chats, we have to work harder to send and receive signals.

In effect, Bailenson said, humans have taken one of the most natural things in the world - an in-person conversation - and transformed it into something that involves a lot of thoughts: "You've got to make sure that your head is framed within the center of the video. If you want to show someone that you are agreeing with them, you have to do an exaggerated nod or put your thumbs up.

That adds cognitive load as you're using mental calories in order to communicate.

Gestures could also mean different things in a video meeting context. A sidelong glance to someone during an in-person meeting means something very different than a person on a video chat grid looking off-screen to their child who just walked into their home office.

Solution: *During long stretches of meetings, give yourself an "audio only" break. "This is not simply you turning off your camera to take a break from having to be nonverbally active, but also turning your body away from the screen," Bailenson said, "so that for a few minutes you are not smothered with gestures that are perceptually realistic but socially meaningless."*

To assess your video chat fatigue check in with yourself and observe your answers to these questions:
- How exhausted do you feel after videoconferencing?
- How irritated do your eyes feel after videoconferencing?
- How much do you tend to avoid social situations after videoconferencing?
- How emotionally drained do you feel after videoconferencing?
- How often do you feel too tired to do other things after videoconferencing?

Sustainability and Video Conferencing

Moving to a more digital workplace has had great impact on environmental benefits in regards to reduced paper waste, printing, and reduction in carbon emissions as a result of reduced transportation. With that being said, more data needs more power!

All of this data traffic places huge energy demands on global data centers, the backbone of the modern internet. As more and more of our daily lives head online, more data centers and more energy will be required. According to one study, the number of internet connected devices is expected to triple from 10 billion in 2020 to around 30.9 billion in 2025. Furthermore, the roll out of high-speed wireless internet connectivity, such as 5G, will also increase the demands of devices individually. Overall, internet data transfer could consume around 20 percent of global energy demands by 2030.

So, what can be done to alleviate this pressure? There are a few simple steps individuals can take to reduce their footprint. Ensure your home and electronic devices run on renewable energy. If you can, switching off video for online calls and fully turning off devices when not in use will also contribue. Win, win, this will support a break to avoid video chat fatigue and will help reduce the demand for power and carbon emissions!

Cowboy Caviar

Texas caviar is perfect to serve as a healthy dip, salad, or side dish. It's naturally vegan, gluten-free and loaded with protein and fiber!

Ingredients

- 1 can (15oz) black eyed peas, drained and rinsed
- 1 can (15oz) black beans, draned and rinsed
- 1 can (14oz) corn, drained
- 2 red bell peppers, finely diced
- 1 jalapeno, finely diced (a few seeds are ok)
- 1/2 red onion, finely diced
- 1 large or 2 small avocados, diced
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro
- 2 limes, juice of
- 3-4 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- mineral salt & pepper to taste

Instructions

Dressing: In a small bowl, whisk together the apple cider vinegar, lime juice, olive oil, chili powder, cumin, garlic powder, add generous pinch of salt. Set aside. (You can also just pour the ingredients over the assembled salad before tossing, but mixing will help dissolve the spices.

Prep: Drain and rinse the black eyed peas and black beans. Drain the canned corn, or if using fresh corn, cut it off the cobb. Dice the red peppers, jalapeno, and onion. Chop the cilantro.

Avocado: The easiest and quickest way to dice an avocado for this recipe is to slice it in half, remove the seed, using a knife, score the flesh into segments, using a cross-hatch pattern, being careful to not break through the skin. Scoop it out using a large spoon, getting as close to the skin as possible, in one swoop.

Assemble: In a large bowl, add the beans, corn, bell pepper, jalapeno, onion, avocado, and cilantro. Pour the dressing overtop and toss well to coat. Taste for flavor.

Eat right away, or let the salad rest in the refrigerator for a few hours to let the flavors mingle.

Leftovers will stay fresh for up to 4-5 days in an airtight container in the refrigerator. I don't recommend freezing this salad if adding avocado, if planning on freezing, omit the avocado and add it when serving. Freeze for up to 2 months.

Random Act of Kindness Initiative

A new initiative from the CMMHC Wellness Committee, is a Random Act of Kindness Day. Each month the Wellness Committee will be sending out a reminder to staff about completing a Random Act of Kindness around the 15th of the month. The Random Act of Kindness doesn't have to cost any money and can be something as simple as smiling at someone you don't know, leaving a kind comment or could be paying for a stranger's coffee order. The list is endless. Are you interested in learning more about Random Acts of Kindness or the benefits?

Visit the Bounce Back Project website.
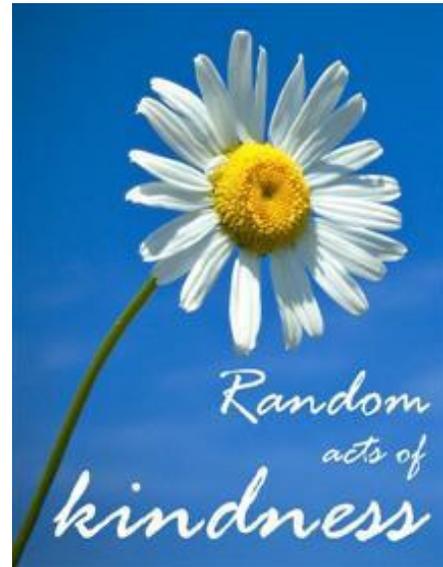
We hope that you will join the CMMHC Wellness Committee in participating with us for:
Random Act of Kindness Day
August 15, 2021.

CMMHC's Wellness Committee Mission Statement

It is the mission of the CMMHC Wellness Committee to promote the health and wellness of staff through education and initatives that:

• Encourage habits of wellness
• Increase awareness of factors and resources contributing to well-being
• Inspire and empower individuals to take responsibility for their own health
• Support a sense of community

Central Minnesota Mental Health Center Wellness Committee

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