

Zoomed Out? What Zapped? Teams Fatigue?

[Dr Andrew Tresidder](#)



Technology is wonderful. There's no doubt that video calls have made connection, conferences, classes and consultations possible during lockdown in unexpected ways. We can see faces, expressions and smiles. We can see loved ones, patients, colleagues, teachers and pupils, as well as hear them. We can screen share in presentations. We can watch new clips or longer sessions on YouTube or Vimeo. Many can work remotely in ways few of us dreamed of six months ago.

But there are downsides. Many people feel repeated or prolonged video connections tiring, occasionally even dehumanizing. The staring eyes from others can be a challenge – as can seeing your own face! Why might this be, and how can we protect against it?

Let's just talk about the differences between physical face to face (F2F) connection and video connection (VC), to try and understand why VC can be tiring to our bodies and minds. Remember first that bodies and muscles are designed to move in fluid sequence, not to hold the same position for a long time. Natural body movement is forwards, backwards, sideways, twisting, bending. Head movements look around the room, eye movements scan a whole room and study each different person's face sequentially.

F2F involves 'getting there' – travel and physical. Walking, stairs, opening and closing doors, then sitting down, adjusting posture, looking up, looking down, looking around. At the end, we leave, physically, using muscles again. F2F involves being there in our minds as well – but with the support of being able to look around and ponder, see what is on the walls, out of the window, observing other peoples' bodies (not just heads), what they are doing, not doing, paying attention or not paying attention, reading a whole range of non-verbal as well as verbal information to help us make sense of the situation. In F2F conversation, eye contact is made frequently and briefly, with one or many people, and rarely for a prolonged time. In F2F, it's obvious if the other person or people are not paying attention, checking emails or phones, doing something else or if they are in the room. You can see who wants, or needs to speak next. In F2F, our animal bodies only hold a prolonged posture through frozen fear or alert for imminent danger – or if they are deliberately and consciously relaxing, and switched off.

In VC, we have already arrived. VC involves sitting in our own chair, often for prolonged periods of time. We can see at least other person's face and possibly torso, but rarely the whole person. They too are locked into fixed positions. Prolonged sitting in one position can

fossilize our posture. VC involves in line focus, unmoving body, little eye movement, frozen patterns of posture – yet requiring more brain-power. Eye contact may be prolonged - or not at all, because the camera is set off-centre. Many non-verbal cues are lost, which means the brain has to work harder to concentrate and make sense of the available information - this is tiring.

At a deeper level, television, and screens, can have a hypnotic and addictive effect upon our brains – many people have given their children a screen to watch to divert and pacify them. And prolonged eye contact F2F has social meanings – the four P's of prolonged eye contact are Passion, Persuasion, Pleading and Predation. (Usually in screen free contact, eye gaze is broken every few seconds). Prolonged eye contact in VC is unnatural, and jangles against our physiology. Devices also emit signal and fields, some people find this tiring over time.

So how can we help ourselves avoid being Zoomed Out or Teams Fatigued?

Ensure comfortable posture. Move frequently. Stand up, swing your body around. If you are chairing a meeting, invite people to do this every so often – and ensure they physically leave the meeting every hour for a few minutes (bathroom, drink, etc – and as a minimum just moving their bodies). Look away from the screen and around the room – and give others permission to do this too. Switch off the image of your own face. Ensure plenty of fluids, remember meal breaks. Wash your hands or face with cold water when you leave the screen – to refresh self. Be aware that prolonged eye contact can be exhausting. Avoid being screen-tranced. Don't try and multi-task despite the seductive 'ping' of the inbox

Remember, natural emotional and physical fluidity is constrained by prolonged posture and tight-thinking technology – so we have to learn how to observe and communicate in new ways that are fluid and natural – and look after our own physiology – to help us avoid screen fatigue!

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