

Studies show online video chat platforms exhaust the human mind and body, and it's part of something much bigger. Here, **Claudia Brandt**, who works as a personality coach with teams and their leaders online, shares her insight



The truth about Zoom fatigue

Words by **Thobeka Phanyeko**

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IF YOU'RE FEELING DEPLETED from attending virtual meetings, you could be experiencing Zoom fatigue, which applies to all platforms used for virtual meetings. 'These leave us more strained and exhausted than face-to-face ones, mainly because fundamental clues are missing: eye contact and body language are restricted,' Claudia Brandt explains. 'It's particularly stressful because we use these clues to extract information. Eye contact assures us we can trust and depend on the person we're communicating with.'

When information is limited in the absence of these clues, the unconscious mind goes into overdrive, causing anxiety, which we suppress because there's no real reason for it. But your body still experiences a stress response.

'The same goes for body language. We're looking for clues, asking ourselves: *what other information is available? What is the other person really trying to say? Can I trust them? Are they really engaging with me?* As this information falls away, your brain gets tired and unhappy.'

Without these clues, it's hard to make informed decisions. 'Your brain needs to make sure you're safe and that you can trust and connect with the person on your video call. It keeps trying, but as the information isn't forthcoming, it puts your subconscious mind under constant strain.'

Zoom fatigue coincides with a pandemic, Brandt points out. 'Change, in general, is exhausting because when we operate in

change, we often don't know how to proceed, there's a lot of uncertainty, and the brain cannot go along its familiar path, drawing from a pool of ready made plans. On the contrary, it needs to redesign new solutions, the most exhausting activity of all.'

Brandt says we need routine and affirmation now more than ever, as we ask ourselves: *how do I work from home? How do I keep the kids busy? How do I do the kids' homework with them? How do I ensure I stay connected with my team? How do I read the information I receive from my team? How do I learn Zoom, Slack and Teams?* Then there's the uncertainty around the work environment: *How do I keep my job? How's the company doing?*

Zoom fatigue is one aspect of fatigue experienced by many as the world continues to change. 'It contributes to overall fatigue.'

Brandt cautions this type of fatigue can lead to forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating, an inability to be present with others, as well as frustration and irritability. It's also crucial to note that although these are signs of burnout, Zoom fatigue isn't the source. 'I think it's a term we've minted to explain to ourselves the kind of fatigue we're experiencing. It's part of change fatigue,' she explains.

Physical symptoms of Zoom fatigue include: tiredness, and muscular discomfort from sitting at a desk for prolonged periods in a cramped position and tensing up when you're anxious.'

How do you beat it? 'As it's a form of exhaustion, make sure you get enough rest, don't work long hours constantly and have an honest conversation with your team about how much time you can realistically commit to Zoom meetings.'

Have Zoom-free days and keep meetings short. Be conscious of your time when scheduling meetings and clear about who needs to be there for what you need to achieve. Be more efficient during a meeting but also ask how everyone's doing.

You may want to turn your camera off for your next

'It's utterly draining and inhumane to speak to a plethora of blank screens'

Zoom meeting as it feels more comfortable, but Brandt advises against this. 'It makes it tougher for other people because speaking to a blank screen is even worse for the brain, which has to work harder than it already is.'

It's also easy to get distracted if you've switched off your camera, which may prolong the meeting. 'For the person who's speaking, it's utterly draining and inhumane to speak to a plethora of blank screens. Don't do that to anyone. You won't help yourself either,' she adds. You could consider turning off Self View, which Brandt says is helpful because we're not used to looking at ourselves in a meeting. 'It normalises the confusing set up a bit, where you're in a meeting but also looking at yourself a lot.'

Gratitude goes a long way when it comes to overcoming Zoom fatigue. 'It's crucial to be grateful for the small things you have in your life such as a moment in the sun, being able to look outside and see something beautiful, the embrace of your child or partner, playing with your pets, connecting with nature and exercising. Balance these happy pursuits with time in front of your screen, where your brain may get frustrated if it doesn't receive the information it needs, becoming frantic and anxious. Your brain and senses need those positive, soothing moments to recover. If you add in gratitude, this becomes a powerful tonic to deal with fatigue.'

Connecting with others not only calms the brain, but Brandt further affirms, also feeds our need for connection. ❖

Claudia Brandt is an executive personality coach who helps strong managers with strong personalities develop into strong leaders. For more information, visit brandt-coaching.com