

Careful, you might have ZOOM GLOOM



Zoom fatigue, or Zoom Gloom can also be experienced if you're using Google Hangouts, Skype, FaceTime, or any other video-calling interface. The explosion of their use in response to the pandemic has launched an unofficial social experiment, showing at a population scale what's always been true: **virtual interactions can be extremely hard on the brain.**

Humans communicate even when they're quiet. During an conversation, the brain focuses partly on the words being spoken, but it also derives additional meaning from dozens of non-verbal cues, like whether someone is facing you or slightly turned away, if they're fidgeting while you talk, or if they inhale quickly in preparation to interrupt. These cues help paint a picture of what is being conveyed and what's expected in response.

Since humans are social animals, perceiving these cues comes naturally to most of us, takes little conscious effort to perceive, and can lay the groundwork for emotional intimacy. However, a typical video call can impair these abilities, and requires an intense attention to words instead. If you can only view a person from the shoulders up, the possibility of viewing hand gestures or other body language is gone. If the video quality is poor, any hope of gleaning something from facial expressions is dashed. It can be a brain drain for someone who is really dependent on those non-verbal cues.

Multi-person screens magnify this exhausting problem. Gallery view—where all meeting participants appear Brady Bunch-style—challenges the brain's central vision, forcing it to decode so many people at once that no one comes through meaningfully, not even the speaker. Psychologists call this continuous partial attention, and it applies as much to virtual environments as it does to real ones. Think of how hard it would be to cook and read at the same time. That's the kind of multi-tasking your brain is trying to navigate in a group video chat.

This leads to problems in which group video chats become less collaborative and more like single conversations, in which only two people at a time talk while the rest listen. Because each participant is using one audio stream and is aware of all the other voices, parallel conversations are impossible. If you view a single speaker at a time, you can't see how non-active participants are behaving—something you would normally pick up on.

For some people, the prolonged split in attention creates a sense of being drained while having accomplished nothing. The brain becomes overwhelmed by unfamiliar excess stimuli while being hyper-focused on searching for non-verbal cues that it can't find. **That's why a traditional phone call may be less taxing on the brain.**

If you find yourself in a lot of virtual meetings and are experiencing "Zoom Gloom" and feeling more anxious, call Best Care EAP. Counselors are here to help. **Sessions are also available via telehealth and are completely confidential. Call 800-801-4182.**