

IS YOUR OWN BATTERY RUNNING LOW?

It's not just your laptop that needs to be recharged after Zoom sessions and Google Meets

By April Gonzalez

"Meet George Jetson..." This was the opening jingle introducing the family members of the 1960s TV cartoon series,

The Jetsons, a glimpse into a futuristic world. The Jetsonian "video phone" depicted in every episode was something we could only dream of.



The future is here. And the circumstances that have thrust many of us into working remotely and meeting virtually could not be further

from the futuristic golden age portrayed in *The Jetsons*. As many of us are engaging in more virtual meetings through applications such as Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet, some are experiencing a fatigue and exhaustion from these interfaces that we haven't experienced before.

Educators, the very nature of whose work is grounded in face-to-face interactions, report that they're sharing in this struggle. Principals who are meeting online with their teachers have noticed that attention wanes dramatically after an hour. A teacher described her "open hours" sessions for students as challenging because she is not really able to tell whether they are struggling with the material. Other educators have reported that during video meetings, they end up multi-tasking and checking email because it is frustrating to meet without the authentic opportunity to engage and participate. The emotional impact we are experiencing from the disruption of a pandemic can leave us all feeling enervated. Added to this is a specific kind of exhaustion linked to video-conferencing. This experience has become so common that it's earned its own slang term, "[Zoom Fatigue](#)."

If you have struggled with the sudden need to take a nap after such a meeting, you are not alone. We have known for a long time that effective communication involves more than words. Tone and body language, such as gestures, facial expressions, and position of the body, play a significant role in what we perceive. Our ability to scan others' [body](#)

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KEY STRATEGIES FOR ENERGIZED, EFFECTIVE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

With the future of education and reopening unknown at this time, how can we mitigate some of the feeling of "Zoom gloom"? Whether you are leading a meeting or participating in one, there are several strategies we can use.

Presenters:

- [Test](#) technology ahead of time. We know how important it is to respect people's time. When technical difficulties prevent a meeting from starting on time, or if there are delays during the meeting, momentum is lost and everyone feels frustrated.
- [Define the purpose](#) of the meeting clearly. Establish the goals or outcomes of the meeting to provide a focus for listening and participating.
- Use an [icebreaker](#) to open the meeting. At a time when many feel socially isolated and may have been directly impacted by the pandemic, doing so can humanize the online experience. This can be a moment to demonstrate caring and create a "safe" video-conferencing environment.
- [Minimize](#) the length of the meeting time, ideally 30-45 minutes depending on the purpose. Send pre-reading material in advance in order to save time during the meeting and avoid logistics in taking time, while online, to read.
- [Build in breaks](#) if the video-conferencing session needs to be longer. Sharing a small video clip, as appropriate, or using interactive applications like Kahoot and Padlet can be used to break from the focus of looking for non-verbal cues. Participants can also be encouraged to attend to home issues or take a "bio-break" on their own whenever needed.

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[language](#) or facial expression to get a quick read on what they're thinking or feeling is an important component of our communications skills. Neuroscience continues to reveal that the brain is wired for learning through all of our senses. When we communicate face-to-face, we perceive through all of our senses. However, the online interface limits that ability. "During an in-person conversation, the brain focuses partly on the words being spoken," science writer Julia Sklar notes, "but it also derives additional meaning from [dozens of non-verbal cues](#), such as 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." In these virtual meetings, we are often constructing meaning without all of the usual tools we usually utilize. The intense [focus on words](#) and sustained eye contact is exhausting.

There are several other factors that, if not as substantial as non-verbal cues, contribute to the overload factor. The opportunity to share a space, interact in close proximity, and make direct eye-contact with individuals is diminished. Libby Sander and Oliver Bauman, professors at Australia's Bond University, note, "The heightened emphasis on facial cues and the ability to [see oneself](#) can also act as a stressor."

To some extent, video conferencing creates the sense that one is on stage and is being judged by the performance. If we know we are on camera, we have a heightened [awareness that we're being watched](#). One can argue that teachers are used to being "on stage" in their classrooms. However, the classroom environment is designed to create a safe place to learn and involves personal interactions. During video-conferencing, worries about what is in the background, the lighting, and where to situate yourself is unfamiliar territory for most of us. As Sander and Bauman also note, "We feel anxious about our remote [workspace](#) and controlling events that might make us look bad." Likewise, worries about disruption from family members and [pets](#) can add to the anxiety and serve as another distraction in communication and obstacle to feeling present. Video-conferencing, upon which so many of us rely now for interpersonal interactions outside our home, has its dehumanizing side

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KEY STRATEGIES

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Presenters:

- Schedule smaller group meetings. It is much easier to focus on fewer tiles and there are more opportunities for authentic participation in smaller groups or break-out groups.
- Manage the online meeting with a shared approach to minimize feeling overwhelmed. It often makes sense to have two people lead a session: a presenter and a [facilitator](#). The facilitator can manage the technology, take notes and watch for those who wish to participate, thus allowing the presenter to focus on presenting information. A facilitator can also capture [real-time feedback](#) in managing polls, surveys, and comments.
- [Call on individual participants](#) to contribute, or at least check in to see if they have anything to add. This can be accomplished more easily in smaller group meetings. This is another way to make clear that the voices of all participants matter.
- Consider sources of [onscreen stimuli](#). This includes the background of the place you choose to host a video-conference. There are calm backgrounds that can be applied rather than the natural setting if your space is "busy." Likewise, if a slide show and other documents are being shared, apply a minimalist approach as much as possible. In addition, you can hide your "tile" so you do not focus on your appearance.
- [Listen carefully and make connections](#). Recognize that participants do not have all of the non-verbal cues readily available to guide them when they respond. Listening carefully and making connections among the key points of the session will help to keep the conversation going and make it relevant.

Participants:

- There is the temptation to [multi-task](#), especially during larger group video-conferencing when there are so many tiles to focus on and little opportunity for active participation. However, multi-tasking and reading emails during a video-conference can add to feelings of anxiety and reduce productivity.

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effects. Technical errors, poor wifi connections, and unfamiliarity with video-conferencing platforms also contribute to feelings of unease. Business and lifestyle writer Yola Robert aptly reminds us, "In the beginning of quarantine, Zoom and many other [conferencing platforms](#) were crashing several times a day." The concerns about losing each other during a conference, or a meeting being "crashed" by an outsider create a heightened alertness that is not natural. To further complicate this, for many these conferencing platforms were unfamiliar prior to the pandemic. When you're not accustomed to it, it's nerve wracking to navigate logging into a meeting, muting and unmuting microphones, turning on and off the camera settings, and other logistics associated with this form of communication. Many have had to adapt, without training, to unfamiliar conferencing platforms.

Even veterans of telecommuting and video-conferencing have experienced the impact of this digital "new normal." As one educational consultant, who in normal times works from home and the nearest café, reports, "I always relied on the face-to-face meetings on my calendar to recharge me from the drain of phone calls and online meetings. Now I don't have that."

KEY STRATEGIES

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Participants:

- When jumping into the conversation, [acknowledge what was said](#) previously. This is a good way to ensure your focus in responding. Clarifying another person's comment also brings the "human" side into the online environment and keeps the conversation more authentic.
- [Listen actively](#) by keeping an open mind, trying to visualize what the speaker is saying, or offering to take notes for the group. Notetaking will also enable you to remember points made as well as points you want to respond to while waiting for your turn to comment.
- [Ask questions](#) as a way to engage in the video-conference and further the conversation. If you need clarification or you missed something, you should ask. It may be likely that others have the same question.

SPIRE LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

The Spire Leadership Group is publishing [free resources](#) for educators and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Follow the links to two of our two recent resource documents:



[Supporting Children During the Trauma of COVID-19](#): This document lists a variety of resources supporting children during the trauma of COVID-19.



[Supporting Children with Disabilities](#): This document provides a list of websites with resources for parents and teachers of children with disabilities.



The [Spire Leadership Group](#) is an education-focused consulting firm based in Philadelphia. Spire Leadership is led by founder and president Tim Matheney, who previously served as a high school principal, the New Jersey Department of Education's Chief Intervention Officer, and the founding Executive Director of the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders. Spire's team includes Consulting Associate April Gonzalez, a veteran principal, assistant principal, and curriculum supervisor. For more information on Spire Leadership, please email Tim (tim@spireleadershipgroup.com), call 732-309-2296 or visit spireleadershipgroup.com.