

The water cooler

Smart and provocative stuff to rule the break room

ZOOM FATIGUE IS A REAL THING

Video calls are here to stay. Here's how to make them better

You're coming out of your work Zoom meeting like a champ, having laid out all the ways you made progress last week and what you're aiming for this week. In any other situation you'd be pouring another coffee, ready to get started.

But you're completely drained. And it's only 10 a.m.

You are definitely not alone, says St. John's psychologist Janine Hubbard. In fact, she's right there with you. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Atlantic Canada she, like many Canadian office workers, also had to pivot to video. Normally, she schedules back-to-back in-person appointments in her office—she prefers them that way—but she quickly found that with video calls, that just wasn't possible.

"I'd finish and I'd just be wrung out and exhausted, going, 'What on earth is going on?' So being the nerdy psychologist that I am, I went and tried to research it," she says. "And the more I dug into it, Zoom fatigue—and it applies to all the platforms—Zoom fatigue is real!"

There's a lot going on in a group video call that we aren't used to and it takes a genuine toll, she says. First there's the overwhelming compulsion to constantly watch yourself on screen. It makes you hyper-aware of your mannerisms and gestures, of what we look like and even what your house in the background might be saying about you. "When you're constantly staring at yourself and all of your behaviours, you're kind of feeling like you need to be on your best behaviour all the time," she says. "It takes a huge amount of focus and attention and concentration."

While you're trying to look away from your own face, you're also often trying to ignore the dings and woops of email and message notifications. Giving in and checking them divides your attention even further, she says.

In a normal meeting, you can move your eyes away from your coworkers' faces and doodle a bit, or walk to the water cooler in the corner—everybody knows you're still engaged. "You're not staring in the face of eight of 12 people for an hour, trying to make

eye contact," Hubbard says. But you are in a Zoom call. And as Hubbard says, "that's just not a normal dynamic."

So how can we improve things? As a group, it's good to lay out the etiquette and expectations before the meeting begins, Hubbard says. For example, if it's okay for people to turn off their video to give their eyes a break, say so. Plan breaks in the meeting for participants, and encourage everyone to stand up, stretch and look away from screens, she says. And definitely schedule breaks for yourself between meetings.



Janine Hubbard is a psychologist who works with children in St. John's, N.L.

Hubbard also recommends closing any tabs that will ping with message notifications, and getting rid of any other device that may do the same.

And embrace the good—there's lots of it. At first Hubbard herself was skeptical about holding therapy sessions via video calls. Now that she's figured out how to best use the tool, she's a believer. "It has allowed a lot more flexibility in terms of me being able to meet with people's schedules. It certainly allowed for a lot of geographic opening up in terms of making sure there's access to people for services in more rural and remote communities ... So I think moving forward, at least for myself, telehealth services will remain a portion of what I offer."



Here are a few pro tips on setting up a video call so you look your best, from St. John's, N.L. filmmaker and cinematographer Lian Morrisson.

Light is everything: natural diffused light is best—easy in foggy places like St. John's—but overall, if you can, aim for natural light from a window. Just make sure you're facing the window, instead of having it behind you. If that's not available, light yourself from the front (but not too harshly) and try not to mix lighting colours or types.

Set up your shot:

It's nice to have a few things in the background, like plants or art, but you don't want to overload it. You also want a good amount of space between you and any walls behind you, otherwise you'll have a mug shot vibe. You also want to be sure you're framing yourself so you're not too close to the camera, and so you're not looking down or up at the camera—you want to be eye level with your screen.

(And, hey, if you're using Zoom, there's a **Touch Up My Appearance** option in **Video Settings** that acts like a very mild Snapchat filter!)