

TOPIC #5: TIPS TO REDUCE STRESSORS ASSOCIATED WITH VIRTUAL ENCOUNTERS



COVID-19 has thrust physicians into a new model of care delivery: virtual health. While there are **many advantages** to providing care virtually, it is important bring awareness to the new stressors it introduces, and tips to mitigate them.

VIRTUAL OR 'ZOOM' FATIGUE



1 WHY ARE ONLINE MEETINGS MORE TIRING?

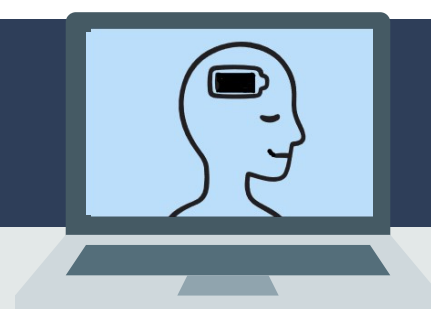
Our brains can only do so many things consciously at once. In contrast, we can process much more information unconsciously, as we do with body language. These features of virtual meetings increase our cognitive load:

- **Looking at your own face is stressful.** It is difficult not to look at your own face if you can see it on screen, and not to be conscious of how you behave in front of the camera ('performance pressure').
- **We miss out on a lot of non-verbal communication.** Seeing someone from the shoulders up, the brain is missing dozens of non-verbal cues used to paint a holistic picture of what is being conveyed and what is expected of the listener. With this impairment, an intense and sustained attention to words is required.
- **Unnatural eye contact.** Eye contact is the strongest facial cue, but 2-way eye contact is impossible. If you are looking at the person's eyes on the screen, in their view, you are looking downward. Staring into the camera risks prolonged eye contact, which can feel threatening or overly intimate.
- **Silence can be misperceived.** During in person conversations, silence creates a natural rhythm. When silence occurs in a video call, you become anxious about the technology. One study found delays of 1.2 seconds or more make people perceive the responder as less friendly/focused.
- **Multi-person view magnifies fatigue.** We would typically have the person speaking in our central vision and others in our peripheral view. 'Gallery view' forces the brain's central vision to decode many people at once.

2 ADDITIONAL STRESSORS UNIQUE TO CLINICIANS

- **Lack of non-verbal cues** may hinder patient assessment and amplify language barriers.
- **New challenges maintaining patient/provider boundaries** (meeting set up may reveal email/phone number, view reveals your home environment, children may come into view).

TIPS



3 HOW TO REDUCE VIRTUAL FATIGUE

- Use the phone when possible, and try to stagger phone/video appointments.
- Use a view so that you do not see yourself or participants other than the speaker.
- Consider using a headset and walking around while talking.
- Create a buffer/transition as you move between work and private personas (such as dressing in work clothes).
- Establish patient/provider boundaries that you are comfortable with in this new setting of care delivery (you may wish to block your personal number, set up a generic email for your clinic, use a folding screen).
- Building in breaks for washroom, nutrition/hydration and stretching or doing a bit of exercise.
- Take a moment before each new appointment to bring your focus to your surroundings (practice mindfulness).
- If there are language barriers, use an external phone line on speaker to call Language Line at 1-866-874-3972.