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Your Zoom Guests Are Stressed Out: You Can Help Them

The trend to substitute in-person conversation with online meetings will continue after the pandemic is history. And yet a day filled with online meetings can be stressful. Today we will focus on Zoom-related stress that is difficult for your guests to articulate.

We are focusing on Zoom because it is such a common platform but the concepts we discuss apply to other web-based conference platforms. We will focus on hard-to-articulate stress associated with facial close-ups, the Host's physical background, staring at yourself, and guest immobility.

“Get Your Face Outta My Face!”

Jeremy Bailenson of Stanford University specializes in the nonverbal psychology of virtual and augmented reality. He argues that one source of nonverbal stress for guests is when the Host’s face is too close to the camera. (2021).

Gazing intensely into the face of another person is for lovers and parents of infants. Is that level of intensity appropriate for business meetings?

Assume your Zoom Host is looking at you with his head dominating your computer screen. You can’t look away. You begin to feel stressed. But you cannot find the words to verbalize your stress. And if you did find the words, it would be socially awkward to say to your Host, “Please get your face out of my face.”

We recommend Hosts make one hand into a fist and place it on top of the head so that the thumb is touching the skull. Center the camera so that the Guest’s view of you includes your head, your fist, and the top half of your chest. This technique ensures that there will be enough room on the other person’s screen.

“I am Bored Looking at You!”

It is the responsibility of the Host to create a pleasing background for the Guest. For example, in a person-to-person meeting in a conference room, the Host might sit with her back to the window so that the Guest can gaze out at the view.

Over a conference table, the Guest knows that the Host cannot track eye movement so the Guest can gaze at the Host’s face but then move to the lovely view behind the Host.

In the virtual world, however, the view behind the Host is not selected for the benefit of the Guest. The view is often selected for the convenience of the Host. For example, the Host does not wish to show a bedroom in disarray, so the background becomes a sterile white wall.

Another Host creates a virtual background consisting of library books on shelves. Gazing at the name of your company might be interesting background for two minutes. But is it interesting after 90 minutes?

Select a background with the Guest in mind. For example, we have a client we meet regularly at a café near the client's home. For our background, we found a photograph of the interior of the café with no patrons. Another Guest loves Paris. We selected a photo of an outdoor Paris café.

If the Guest you are meeting wants to discuss selecting a course of action, you could create a background of a lovely forest with a fork in the path.

There are many images to select from sites like images.google.com. Be careful about not violating the intellectual property rights of the photograph owner. [Pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com) is another resource for images that are free to copy.

Gazing at Yourself

In virtual meetings, the Host is looking at Guests *and* looking at himself watching the Guests. You may think you do not look at yourself often, but you probably do.

And when you look at yourself, Professor Bailenson finds, you will likely engage in negative self-evaluation: "Does she see my double chin? Is my smile sincere enough? Am I sitting up straight?"

Think about how that stress adds up if you have five or more online meetings.

When in Zoom, put your cursor up to the three dots at the upper right-hand corner of your photo. After you click, several options present themselves. One of them is to remove your image. We recommend you select that option as soon as the Guest signs on.

Guest Immobility

In an in-person meeting, a Guest can easily move the chair back, cross legs, engage in sideways glances with the person sitting nearby, and stare at the lovely painting behind the Host. The Guest can rise from her seat to refill a coffee cup, use the chalkboard, or depart for the restroom.

In an online meeting, however, the Guest is required to remain immobile within the limited range of the camera. Imagine the emotional and physical impact of your Guest's immobility over the course of a typical business day?

Was the human body built to function with 90 minutes of immobility?

It can be difficult for your Guests to verbalize how continuous immobility contributes to their feelings of stress.

How Hosts can manage Guest Immobility:

- We recommend Hosts consider an hour to be 45 minutes. For example, if a meeting is scheduled for 9:00 AM, make it understood that the meeting will end at 9:45. This provides Guests with an opportunity to stretch, check email, use the facilities, grab a cup of coffee, and get ready for their 10:00 AM meeting.
- If the Host has a 90-minute meeting, provide a five-minute stretch break in the middle of the session.

Video conferencing programs like Zoom will continue to be popular. Hosts have a responsibility to Guests for respecting the rules of online engagement: proper facial distancing, a pleasing background, showing guests how to remove themselves from self-view, and helping guests to manage immobility.

References

J.N. Bailenson. "Nonverbal Overload: A Theoretical Argument for the Causes of Zoom Fatigue." *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 2,1, 2021.

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Stybel Peabody provides companies with “leadership and career success” for valued senior level talent. Core services include retained search for leaders on Boards or whose jobs touch Boards (Board members, CEOs, COOs, CFOs), leadership coaching, and executive-level outplacement for leaders who should be networking with Board members.

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**Inc. “Best Outplacement Firm” in 2020,
2019, 2018, and 2017.**

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