

Zoom fatigue

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Introduction and statistics

Zoom fatigue¹ describes the fatigue that occurs after numerous virtual meetings during the day and over the week. Many go so far as describing exhaustion.

“Where once there was one meeting after another in the diary, now it’s call after call. No need for a break; after all, you don’t even need to change rooms. Just a couple of clicks – and the screen is full of other people, lined up like a collection of antique busts: head and torso visible, nothing more. In the background, bookshelves, wardrobes, a kitchen interior.” (Ina Karabasz, Handelsblatt 15/07/20)

The Institute for Employment and Employability IBE has been studying this phenomenon and conducted a survey in early September 2020. The timing was deliberately selected because, in view of the COVID-19 crisis, virtual working environments with virtual communication and teamworking have been part of everyday life for many employees for six months now. After half a year, the first sustainable effects can be derived and a first empirical view becomes possible.

422 managing directors, managers, personnel managers, personnel specialists, works and staff councils and HR experts took part in the survey. The following questions were discussed:

- Do you experience zoom fatigue?
- How often do you experience zoom fatigue?
- At what intensity do you experience zoom fatigue?
- How does zoom fatigue manifest itself?
- What bothers you about it?

¹ The present study does not exclusively refer to the communication tool provided by “Zoom Video Communications, Inc.” but to virtual communication platforms of all providers. However, the term “zoom fatigue” has become established in current discourse in the language used. For the sake of simplicity, the term “zoom fatigue” will therefore be used in the following to represent fatigue and exhaustion caused by virtual communication platforms in general.

- What can help reduce zoom fatigue?

Zoom fatigue as a new risk factor?

Approximately 60% of respondents state they experience zoom fatigue. This means that 251 people surveyed suffer from this development. In order to be more specific, we also asked for statements on frequency and intensity. Of the 251 people who experience zoom fatigue, 77.7% say it occurs sometimes. It is a permanent stress factor for only 14.7%. Nevertheless, the intensity of zoom fatigue is strong or very strong for 64.1% of the people who perceive zoom fatigue.

In other words:

- **Almost 60% of the 422 respondents experience zoom fatigue (251 people).**
- **When zoom fatigue is perceived (n = 251), 195 people are sometimes affected and 37 people are always affected.**
- **160 people perceive the stress to be strong or very strong.**

Visibility of zoom fatigue

Tiredness or even exhaustion associated with virtual communication and cooperation as well as virtual meetings manifests itself in different forms. These include, for example:

- Reduced concentration
- Nervousness
- Impatience
- Increased irritability
- Lack of balance
- Impetuous behaviour towards fellow human beings
- Feeling irritable
- Headache

- Back pain
- Limb pain
- Stomach pain
- Insomnia
- Visual disorders

The results of the survey are clear. Almost every respondent who experiences zoom fatigue mentions a reduction in concentration as a consequence. Half of respondents affected experience impatience and a sense of being irritated. No fewer than one third of respondents affected cite a lack of balance and have to cope with increased irritability. Approximately 30% of those who notice zoom fatigue in themselves talk about headaches, back pain and visual disturbances. Grumpy behaviour towards fellow human beings, sleep disorders and agitation occur in about 10 to 15% of the affected respondents. Limb pain and stomach pain are (so far) rarely experienced and visible. These results are in line with numerous studies on health and safety at work, which speak of developmental stages in exposure. In a first step, changes in daily management of the situation can usually be observed. In a second stage, people already start to experience physical limitations, such as headaches. In a third stage the physical and psychological reactions increase significantly (e.g. stomach pain and persistent pain in the limbs).

Figure 1 gives an overview.

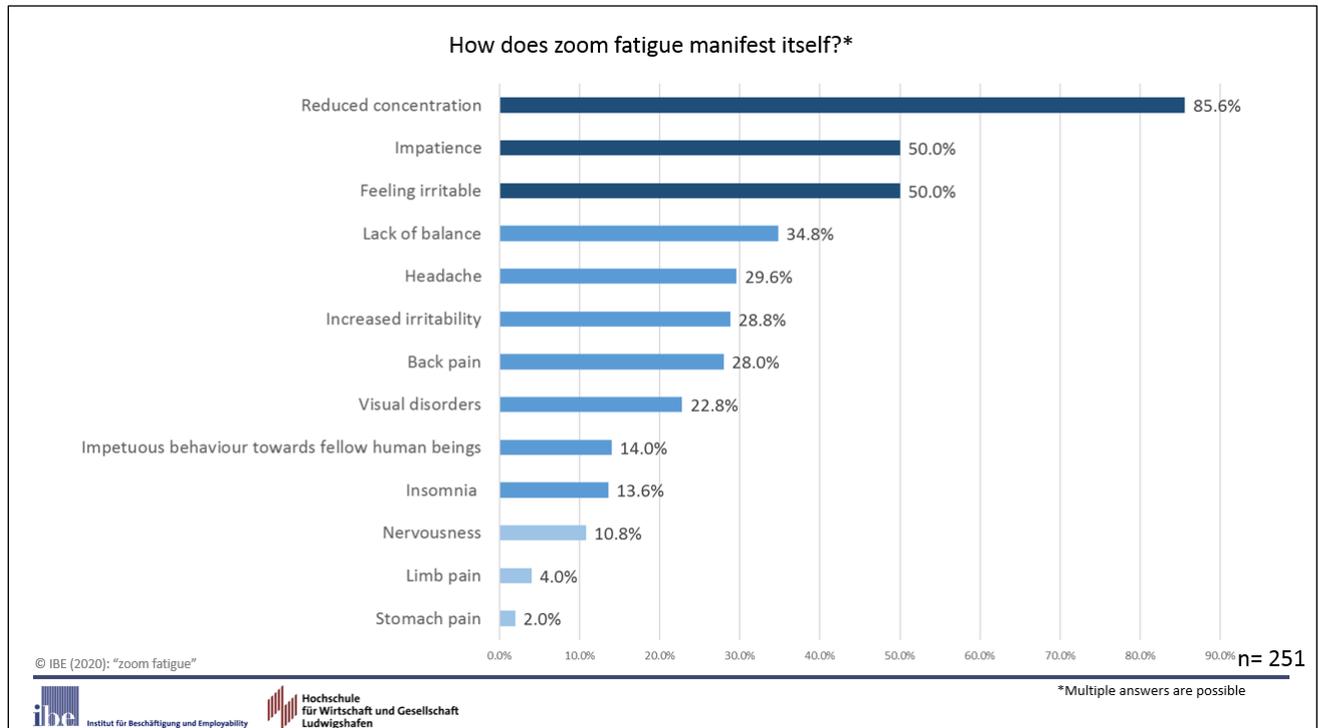


Fig. 1: Stress

Stress drivers

An analysis of stress factors and drivers needs to be made to reduce zoom fatigue. What leads to zoom fatigue? What is stressful about it? The range of possible stress factors is wide. These range from technical conditions to not being able to see gestures and facial expressions, as well as the type of moderation. The following stress factors can be identified in detail:

- Being watched
- Being on display
- Watching yourself
- Cannot see others' gestures
- Cannot see others' facial expressions
- Not being able to pick up on non-verbal cues
- Cannot be inattentive for a minute

- Not being able to make small talk with others
- No shared networking over coffee
- No breaks during a virtual meeting
- No breaks between virtual meetings
- Efficiency of virtual meetings
- Timings within the virtual meetings
- Timing of virtual meetings during the day
- A certain coldness due to the strong factual content of virtual meetings
- Increased technical requirements
- Significant eye strain due to poor image quality
- Frustration due to unstable connection
- Less verbal flow due to latencies / time delays

Basically, three categories of stress factors can be identified. Firstly, the interpersonal aspect plays a role; secondly, organisational factors can be identified. Thirdly, the technology aspect is significant.

Interpersonal aspects:

70% of respondents who experience zoom fatigue identify the lack of non-verbal cues as stress drivers. Approximately 45% of respondents affected explicitly cite the absence of gestures and facial expressions as a stress factor. Around 52% miss small talk and the lack of networking to the extent that it is stressful. The lack of human interaction seems to be the main stress factor.

Organisation:

In addition to the lack of interpersonal interaction in person, the organisational framework and factors can also lead to stress and strain that cause zoom fatigue and even zoom exhaustion. About 45% of respondents who experience zoom fatigue miss having breaks during virtual meetings and between virtual sessions. The timing of meetings throughout the day is also a factor. No less than 40% of respondents consider this stressful. A third of those surveyed think

that virtual meetings are too structured around facts. They lack the “lightness” that can normally be created at face-to-face meetings, e.g. by humorous interjections.

Technique:

More than half of the respondents concerned have to make a great effort to hear because the sound quality is inadequate. More than half of the respondents who experience zoom fatigue talk about time loss due to latencies, 40% are frustrated because of unstable internet connections and more than 35% complain about poor picture quality.

Being “on display” and being watched is perceived as less stressful. This is surprising, because “being watched” is often mentioned in public discussions as one of the central factors that can lead to zoom fatigue. “You observe the participants on screen and at the same time you are aware of being permanently observed by everyone. This constant sense of being under observation, combined with the very efficient work required and the limited use of the sensory organs, is very exhausting.” (dpa July 2020)

The facts, figures and data are shown in Figure 2.

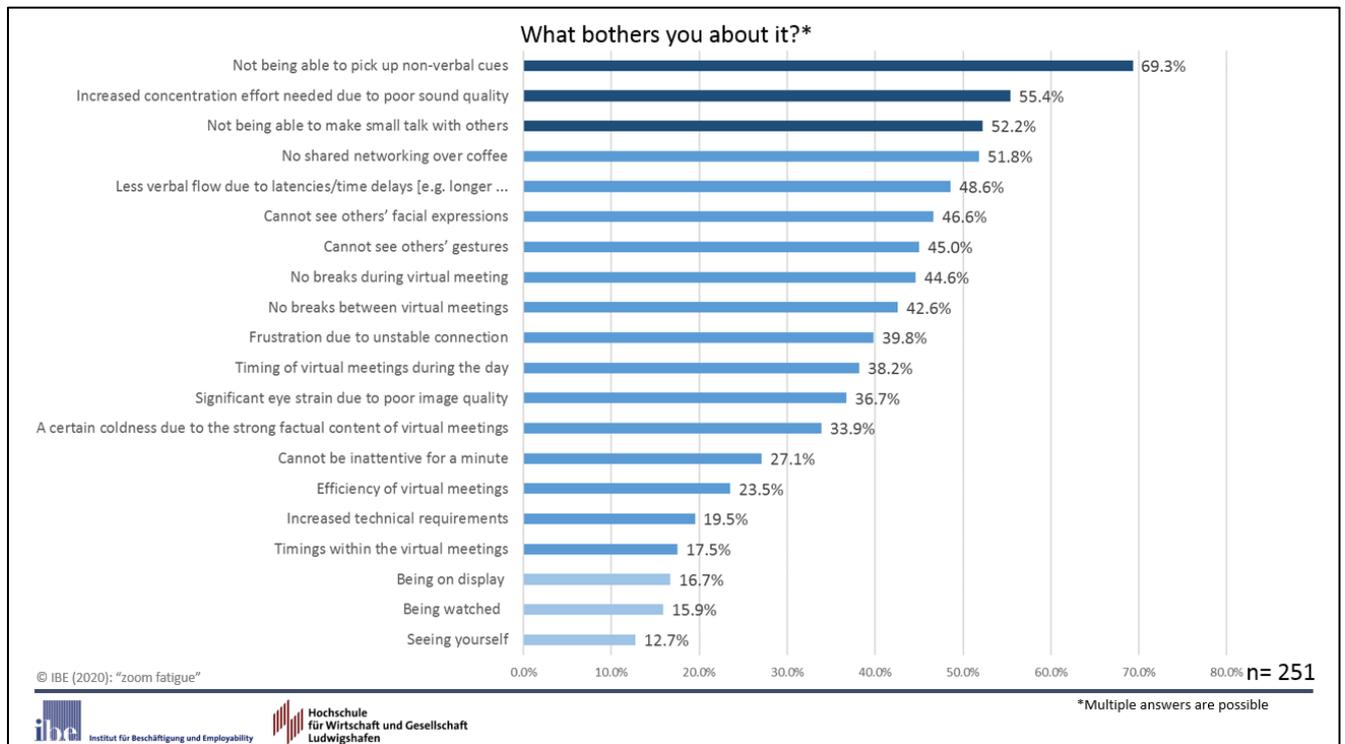


Fig. 2: Stress factors

Possible actions in dealing with zoom fatigue

Zoom fatigue is, undisputably, a development that must be actively countered. If this is not done, there is a very high risk that the mental and physical health of workers will be affected. The consequences would be a rise in sickness rates, impaired performance and declining productivity and motivation. Attractiveness as an employer can also suffer as a result.

This survey puts a number of different measures for the reduction of zoom fatigue up for discussion.

- Artificial breaks (5-10 minutes) in virtual meetings
- Breaks (approx. 10 minutes) between virtual meetings
- Humorous moderation of virtual meetings
- Moderation of virtual meetings which involves all participants

- Limiting the meeting time
- Time slots for topic items in the virtual meeting
- Tools that offer “together mode” to create a perception that we are all sitting in the same room
- Tools that correct the direction of a person’s gaze / attention correction

Respondents identify the limitation of meeting duration and breaks between virtual meetings as particularly effective. Around three-quarters of those surveyed vote for these measures. More than half of them also consider the humorous moderation of the virtual session to be useful. Tools that correct the direction of a person’s gaze (attention correction) are not considered essential. Only 15% of the respondents are in favour of this instrument.

Figure 3 summarises the results.

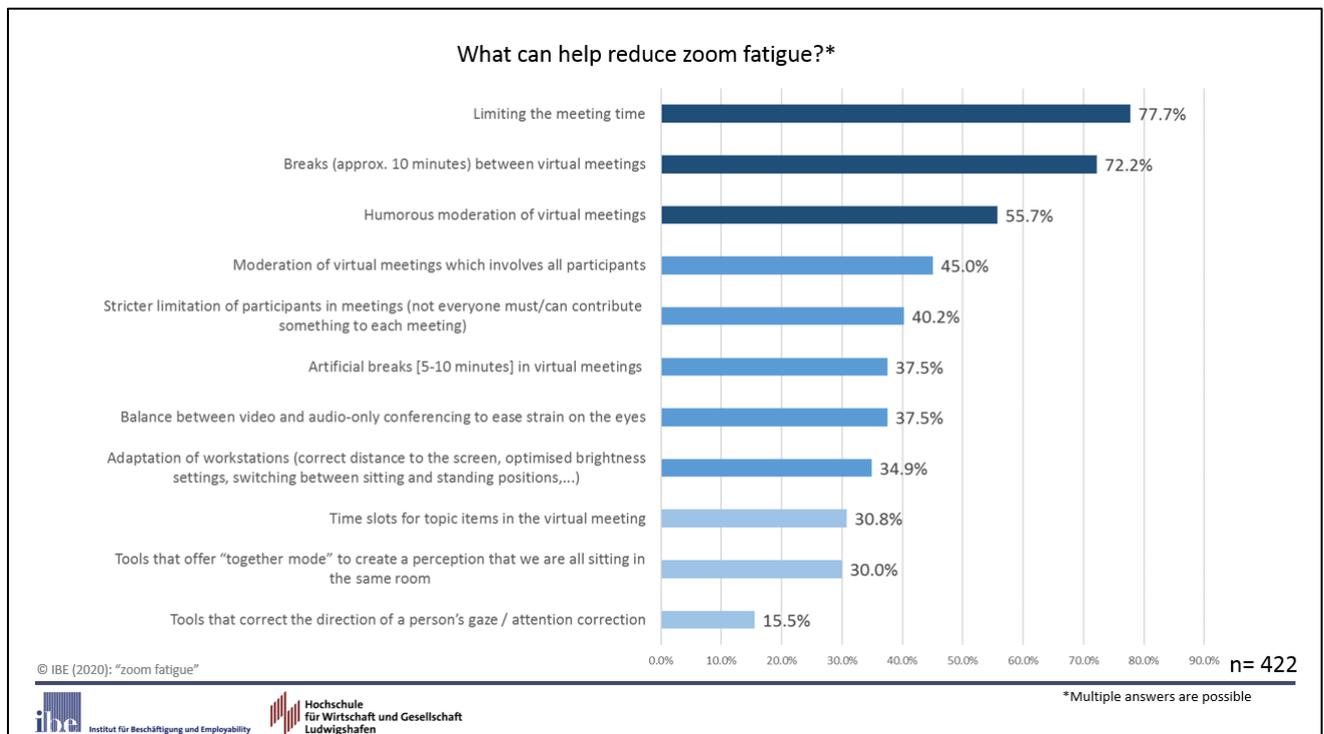


Fig. 3: Options for action

Conclusion / Management Summary

1. The symptoms of zoom fatigue are more likely to manifest themselves in the form of psychological impairments such as concentration problems, impatience, being annoyed and lack of balance.
2. Apart from headache and back pain, direct physical disorders such as pain in the limbs or stomach are (so far) rarely observed.
3. The greatest stress is caused by lack of social and informal exchange (no non-verbal communication, no small talk).
4. Zoom fatigue is also caused by technical shortcomings and participants' organisational conditions.
5. The feeling of being more closely observed and being on show plays a subordinate role.
6. Time limits for meetings as well as breaks between and within meetings are cited as a useful means of avoiding zoom fatigue.
7. Humorous moderation which involves every participant can provide a good structure in meetings and thus reduce stress.
8. Tools using "together mode" or which correct the viewing direction are considered less helpful.