

Camera-On Fatigue

VIDEO CALLS, SELF-MONITORING, MASKING AND EXHAUSTION

Being visible can become another job on top of the meeting

Video calls can make work more accessible. They remove travel, connect remote teams and allow people to work from different locations. But being on camera also changes the experience of a meeting. Instead of simply listening and contributing, a person may become continuously aware of how they look, where they are looking, what their face is doing and how other people might be interpreting them.

The small image of ourselves on screen can create an unusual level of self-monitoring. We rarely sit in an in-person meeting with a mirror beside every colleague, yet on a video call we may watch ourselves for an hour while trying to follow the conversation.

For autistic people, people with ADHD, social anxiety or anyone who masks heavily, this can add another layer of cognitive work. Facial expression, eye contact, posture, movement and the timing of reactions can all become things to consciously manage.

When part of your attention is constantly watching yourself, less attention is available for the conversation.

The pressure to look engaged

Camera culture can create an expectation that engagement must be visible. Someone may force eye contact with the camera, nod more than feels natural, hold their body still or maintain a socially expected facial expression even when those behaviours make listening harder.

Ironically, looking away, moving, doodling or reducing visual input may actually help some people concentrate. If the workplace judges engagement mainly by appearance, employees may spend energy performing attention rather than using the strategies that genuinely support it.

Masking on screen

Masking can involve consciously or unconsciously adjusting natural behaviour to meet social expectations. On video, the person can see the mask as they are creating it. This may increase self-consciousness and make the meeting significantly more tiring.

Why a day of video calls can feel physically exhausting

Screen focus, limited movement, audio delays, multiple faces, reduced non-verbal context and repeated transitions between calls can all contribute to fatigue. The body may have been sitting still, but the brain has been working continuously.

Camera Choice Can Support Better Participation

A camera can be useful when visual information genuinely adds value. There are times when seeing one another supports communication, relationship building or the task itself. But a default rule that cameras must always be on can ignore individual needs and the purpose of the meeting.

Camera off does not automatically mean disengaged

Some employees listen better without their own image or multiple moving faces on screen. Others may need to stand, move, look away, regulate sensory input or reduce visual demand. A person may be contributing fully while their camera is off.

Where camera use matters for a particular reason, explain the reason rather than relying on a blanket expectation. Clear purpose makes it easier to find an appropriate solution.

Hide self-view where possible

If the platform allows it, hiding your own video from your personal view while remaining visible to others can reduce self-monitoring. You no longer have to watch yourself listening, speaking or reacting.

Reduce unnecessary visual load

Gallery view can place many faces and movements on screen at once. Speaker view, minimising the meeting window or reducing other on-screen distractions may help some people. Turning off non-essential notifications can also reduce competing demands.

Build movement back into remote work

Back-to-back calls can keep somebody physically fixed in one position for hours. Where appropriate, consider audio-only sections, walking calls, short breaks between meetings or allowing people to stand and move without interpreting that movement as lack of attention.

Managers can set the tone

If leaders occasionally say, 'Camera optional today,' or explain when visual participation is actually needed, they signal that contribution matters more than performance. They can also avoid commenting unnecessarily on someone's background, appearance or camera habits.

Connection is valuable. Constant visual performance is not the only way to create it.

Creating More Inclusive Video Meetings

Inclusive video-call practice starts by asking what the meeting is trying to achieve. If people need to collaborate visually, camera use may be useful. If the meeting is primarily an information update, forcing everybody to remain visibly present may add demand without improving the outcome.

Think about the whole video-call day

One camera-on meeting may be manageable. Six may be very different. Look at cumulative load: how many calls are scheduled, whether there are breaks, how much concentrated work must happen afterwards and whether employees have any control over how they participate.

For neurodivergent employees, helpful adjustments might include camera flexibility, agendas in advance, chat-based contributions, breaks, reduced meeting frequency or permission to move during calls. Individual needs vary, so conversation is more useful than assumptions.

If camera anxiety is becoming significant

Notice what part feels hardest. Is it seeing yourself, being watched, your home being visible, eye-contact expectations, appearance concerns, sensory overload or uncertainty about how you are expected to behave? Different causes need different responses.

Where anxiety or another health concern is substantially affecting work or daily life, support from a GP, therapist, occupational health or another appropriate professional may be useful.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

I think we sometimes forget how strange it is to spend hours watching our own face while we work. Then we judge ourselves for feeling tired by it.

If video calls leave you depleted, I would want you to look at everything you are doing during that call — listening, processing, speaking, monitoring your expression, watching other faces, managing your background and trying to look appropriately engaged. That is a lot of simultaneous work.

And for workplaces, I would ask a simple question: do we need the camera, or have we simply become used to asking for it? Sometimes seeing each other matters. Sometimes giving somebody permission to switch it off is what allows them to listen properly.

Real connection does not require perfect performance.

A video-call check-in: What makes camera-on meetings tiring for me? Do I watch myself constantly? Would hiding self-view help? Do I need movement, fewer faces, breaks or occasional camera-off participation? Which changes would help me contribute more effectively?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health, safety or employment advice.