Camera-On Fatigue

Video calls, self-monitoring, masking and exhaustion | Space to Breathe Therapy

Video meetings can make work more accessible, but keeping a camera on may add a second task: managing how we appear while also listening, thinking, speaking and participating. This guide is for employees, managers, HR teams and supporters. Camera preferences are not a reliable measure of engagement.

What makes video meetings tiring?

During a call, we may monitor our facial expression, posture, eye contact and reactions; scan multiple faces; read chat; follow slides; and manage interruptions or delays. The screen can become a crowded social environment with fewer natural cues than an in-person discussion.

Watching your own face

Self-view can invite constant checking: Do I look attentive? Am I smiling enough? Do I seem bored? Hiding self-view may reduce this distraction while allowing others to see you, where the platform supports it. Some people prefer turning their camera off entirely.

Masking and the effort to look engaged

Masking can involve consciously controlling expression, gaze, movement or speech to meet perceived expectations. For some autistic and ADHD employees, this additional monitoring can increase fatigue. Experiences vary: no diagnosis automatically predicts how someone will feel about cameras.

An important distinction

Camera-off does not automatically mean disengaged. Looking away, moving, using a fidget, listening without video or reducing gallery view can support attention. Conversely, some people benefit from visual connection. Ask what helps rather than assume.

Try noticing the difference

• One 20-minute call may feel manageable; six consecutive camera-on meetings may not.

• A presentation where visual cues matter differs from a routine information update.

• A choice that helps one person may make another person feel disconnected.

Recognise the cumulative load

Possible signs of camera-on fatigue

Feeling drained after calls; headaches or eye strain; difficulty following discussion; tension from maintaining facial expressions; delayed task completion; irritability; needing recovery time; or feeling apprehensive before the next meeting. These signs are not a diagnosis and may have other causes.

Why meeting design matters

Long calls, crowded gallery views, back-to-back scheduling, unclear agendas and pressure to keep video on can compound demand. Frequent switching between meeting, chat, notes and slides may increase cognitive load. An employee may be actively listening even when their face is not visible.

Anxiety, rejection sensitivity and past experience

People who worry about being judged may feel particularly aware of how they look on screen. Previous criticism about attention, eye contact or facial expression can make camera use feel like a performance. A respectful workplace avoids treating neutral expressions as evidence of poor attitude.

Autism, ADHD and sensory differences

Some autistic people experience eye-contact expectations, multiple moving faces or social decoding as demanding. Some people with ADHD find a live self-view or busy gallery distracting and may focus better while moving. These are possibilities, not universal characteristics. Discuss individual preferences without demanding a diagnostic explanation.

Practical adjustments to trial

• Make cameras optional by default where practical, and explain any specific reason video is needed.

• Allow participants to hide self-view, use speaker view or minimise visual tiles.

• Provide agendas, written questions and follow-up notes; accept contributions in chat or afterwards.

• Schedule 5–10 minute gaps between meetings and protect breaks.

• Use shorter meetings, audio-only updates or asynchronous messages when suitable.

• Agree ways to show participation that do not depend on continuous eye contact or smiling.

• Check captions, accessible materials and individual communication preferences.

Safety and role requirements

Some activities genuinely benefit from video, including visual demonstrations or certain collaborative tasks. Explain the purpose and consider proportionate alternatives. Accessibility and reasonable adjustments should be considered individually, alongside legitimate operational needs.

Conversations that help

Employee: a low-pressure way to explain the issue

“I follow the discussion better when I can reduce visual distractions. Could I keep my camera off for routine updates, or hide self-view and use speaker view? I can contribute verbally or in chat and review how it works with you.”

Employee: when the schedule is the problem

“I am finding several camera-on meetings in a row tiring, and it is affecting my focus afterwards. Could we build in breaks, shorten some calls or agree which meetings actually need video?”

Manager: opening a useful discussion

“We want people to participate effectively, and that may look different for different colleagues. Which meeting arrangements help you concentrate? Is there anything we could trial and review?”

Manager: if visual presence is important

“For this particular demonstration, video would help us see the process. Can we agree a short camera-on portion, with the rest of the meeting flexible?”

Responses to avoid — and better alternatives

• Instead of “If your camera is off, you are not paying attention”, ask “What participation method works best for this discussion?”

• Instead of “Everyone else manages”, ask “Are our meeting expectations creating avoidable barriers?”

• Instead of “You must look at the camera”, focus on the quality of the contribution, not gaze.

Disability and reasonable adjustments

In Great Britain, the Equality Act 2010 may require employers to make reasonable adjustments where a disabled employee is placed at a substantial disadvantage. The adjustment depends on the person, job and circumstances. ACAS and the Equality and Human Rights Commission provide guidance. Avoid requiring unnecessary disclosure of private medical information.

When to seek more support

If fatigue is persistent, symptoms worsen or participation becomes difficult despite adjustments, consider speaking with a manager, occupational health, GP or appropriate professional. HR or a trade union representative may help with workplace processes. For urgent mental health concerns, seek appropriate immediate support.

Personal meeting audit

Use this page to spot patterns rather than judge yourself. You may fill it in after one meeting or review a typical week.

Which types of video calls are most draining, and which are easier?

What changes when I can hide self-view, look away or switch my camera off?

Do I notice fatigue from the camera, meeting length, content, interruptions or a combination?

What does effective participation look like for me?

Which one change could I try this week?

Meeting adjustment planner

Agree a small, testable change, then review its impact. The aim is effective communication and sustainable participation, not perfect camera performance.

Meeting or situation I want to improve:

What I notice before, during and after it:

Adjustment I would like to trial:

How I can participate or contribute instead:

Who I will discuss this with, and when:

What would show that the change is helping?

Review date and next step:

For managers and teams

A short team review

• Which meetings genuinely require live video?

• Are camera expectations explained, proportionate and consistent?

• Do staff have ways to participate without being continuously visible?

• Are agendas, breaks, captions and notes routinely available?

• Could a shorter meeting or written update achieve the same purpose?

• Are we evaluating contribution rather than appearance?

• Have we invited confidential feedback about accessibility barriers?

A practical team agreement

“We use cameras when they add clear value. At other times, participants can choose the format that helps them engage. We welcome verbal, chat and written contributions; share agendas in advance; and build breaks into longer sessions. Individual adjustments can be discussed privately.”

Further reading and UK support

• ACAS — reasonable adjustments, disability and workplace wellbeing: acas.org.uk

• Equality and Human Rights Commission — Equality Act guidance: equalityhumanrights.com

• Health and Safety Executive — work-related stress: hse.gov.uk/stress

• Access to Work — eligibility and practical support: gov.uk/access-to-work

• Mind — workplace mental health information: mind.org.uk

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Sometimes seeing each other matters. Sometimes the most supportive thing is letting someone switch their camera off so they can listen properly. Real connection does not require perfect performance.

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Educational information only; not a diagnosis, treatment plan or substitute for individual occupational-health, clinical or legal advice.