

Practicing Self-Care and Maintaining Focus and Energy During Busy Zoom Days



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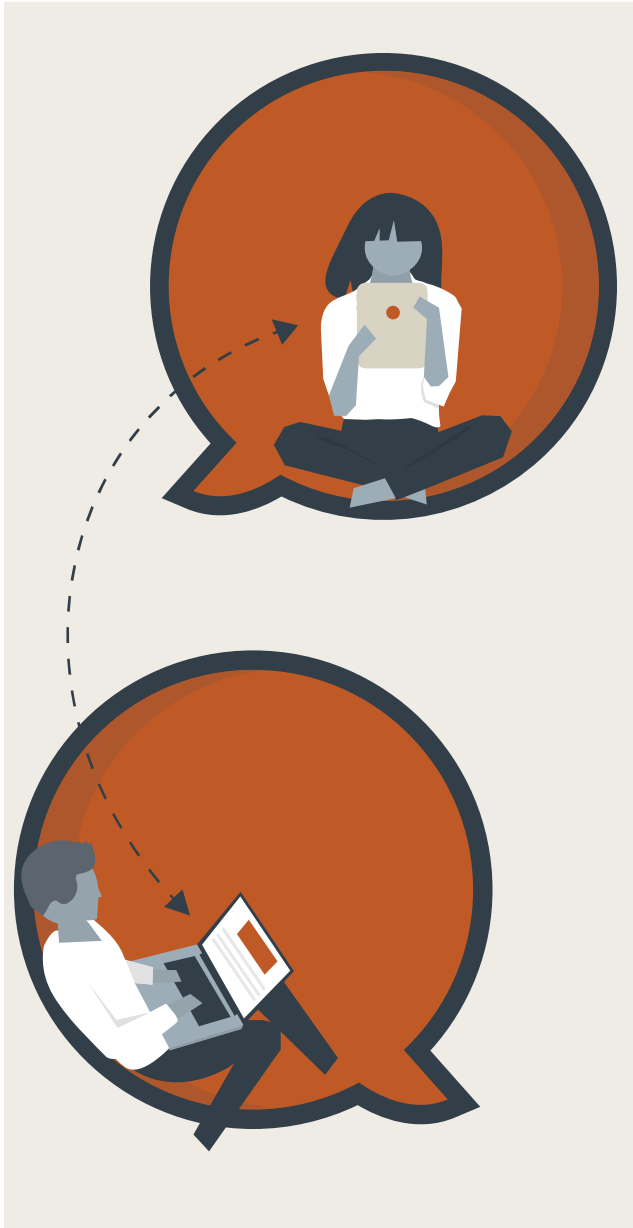
Current research and anecdotal evidence speak to the exhausting nature of Zoom calls and resulting “Zoom fatigue” and “Zoom burnout” that can negatively impact our productivity, mental health, and wellness. Here are some strategies you can use to help prevent or alleviate Zoom fatigue during busy seasons at school and work.

Outside the Zoom Room:

Consider the following actions, rituals, or habits you might adopt to help cultivate more comfortable and sustainable work environments for Zoom:

- **Deep Breathing:** Before hopping on a call, take a few moments to relax and reset by practicing deep breathing. Try breathing through your nose for 5 seconds and then breathing out through your mouth for 7 seconds. This exercise can be modified, lengthened, or repeated. Deep breathing and meditation help us activate our parasympathetic nervous system and combat feelings of anxiety or stress.
- **Maintain a Clear Ritual and Designated Workspace:** Get ready for school or work each morning just as you would if you were getting ready to leave your house. Wake up at the same time every day, and leave plenty of time to get ready before your meetings or classes begin for the day. If possible, set up a desk or work area (perhaps a specific armchair, seat at the dining room table, or corner in your living space) where you can Zoom. Having a constant and separate workspace will help you mentally transition into and out of work modes as you physically move from your workspace to your living space.
 - Even if you do not have a home office or separate workspace, do your best to find small ways to mentally shift between work and relaxation. For example, consider sitting in a chair at your table that faces east while you work. If you eat at the same table, choose to sit in a chair that faces west. Even though you are in the same space, this slight adjustment will help you start to separate work from relaxation mentally. (Redd)
- **Cultivate a Soothing Work Environment:** Equip your workspace with sensory stimuli that will help you maintain energy and concentration. Here are some ways you might activate your senses to ground yourself while working remotely:
 - Keep a soft blanket or sweater nearby in case you start to feel cold
 - Make a warm cup of coffee or tea before or between long meetings
 - Stay hydrated
 - Consider aromatherapy: light a candle or use essential oils
 - Incorporate nature into your lives and workspace as much as possible. Face a window while you work, put a plant on your desk, or post images of natural landscapes by your workspace. During periods of relaxation, spend as much time outside as you can.





Outside the Zoom Room: (cont.)

- **Develop and Maintain Strict Business Hours:** Make it clear to your colleagues and students when and how they can reach you (ideally only between 9 AM and 5 PM Monday-Friday). If possible, refrain from checking your email and Slack channels, scheduling meetings, or engaging in screen time beyond your business hours in order to give your eyes and mind a break. Consider scheduling one or two hours each week (i.e. on a Tuesday morning or a Friday afternoon) when you are off the clock to give yourself structured time to decompress. This will help you disconnect from work and screens in a healthy way and help you rest so that you are energized for future Zoom meetings.
- **Decide the Best Way of Connecting Given the Agenda and Participants:** Though we often default to Zoom as the closest substitute for in-person meetings, it's not the best medium for some - or even most - remote conversations. Here are some alternatives to Zoom which you might consider, especially for one-on-one meetings:
 - **Switch to a phone call:** Since you won't be expending unnecessary energy searching for nonverbal cues, which are more difficult to identify and interpret over Zoom, or worrying about wifi or connectivity, you will feel less drained after a phone call. Fosslein and West Duffy recommend this approach especially for quick check-ins, meetings with colleagues or students with whom you've built a rapport, or the first time you connect with someone about a work-related project. Individuals often feel less stressed when they are able to meet someone over the phone before diving into a Zoom meeting.
 - **Consider if the exchange can happen asynchronously:** If an issue is not time-sensitive, consider conducting interactions over email, Slack, or other online forums.
 - **Consider a hybrid meeting:** Remember that you do not have to adopt an "all or nothing approach." In lieu of a 60 minute Zoom meeting or class, consider convening on Zoom for the first 30-40 minutes of the meeting before switching over to simultaneous conversations on a discussion board, Google doc, or over email. Once you have touched base and discussed the agenda over Zoom, you can maintain that collaborative energy by turning the check-in into a working meeting and giving participants a break from Zoom.
- **Schedule and Honor Zoom Breaks:** If possible, reserve at minimum 10-15 minutes between Zoom meetings throughout the day to give yourself time to reset. Consider including longer scheduled breaks if possible. Advocate for yourself if a meeting runs over and you need to hop off to take a break before your next Zoom commitment.
- **Connect with a therapist and/or CMHC small group to combat feelings of isolation** – You can find information related to the Counseling and Mental Health Center (<https://cmhc.utexas.edu>) and/or their small groups (<https://www.cmhc.utexas.edu/groups.html>) here. If you'd like to explore Group Counseling Q&A, here's a helpful page: https://www.cmhc.utexas.edu/g_qanda.html

Zoom Breaks:

When you can't build in significant breaks due to the scheduling of classes, recurring meetings, or other commitments, consider using these quick "brain breaks" to help get away from the computer and reset in just a few moments:

- **Take a Quick Walk:** If possible, take a walk around your block or living space. Even if the weather or time restraints prevent you from getting fresh air during every break, you might move around just as you would in the office to go to the restroom, the breakroom, or a coworker's office.
- **Move:** Stretch, assume a yoga pose, or complete a brief exercise (such as jump jacks, high knees, or sit-ups) to stay energized.
- **Meditate:** Consider a short guided meditation, such as those available on Youtube or through apps such as Calm or Headspace.
- **Listen to a favorite song:** You only need a few minutes between meetings to listen to a favorite song. Consider a favorite workout beat, feel-good song, or guilty pleasure. Cultivate a "Zoom break" playlist to compile some favorites in an easily accessible place. If you'd like to make this more of a collaborative experience, consider sharing this list with your colleagues or students. Play one of the songs your student(s) recommend just before class begins so that those who arrive early can share in the energizing moment.
- **Have a snack away from your work area:** Take an opportunity to practice self-care by nourishing yourself away from your workspace. Instead of snacking while finishing up an email, give yourself a break from your screen and enjoy a bite to eat.
- **Check in with a nearby roommate, partner, pet, or friend:** If possible, take a few moments to have an in-person interaction with those who share your living and workspace. If you live alone, consider sending a text message or calling someone you care about to connect with others without using a computer screen.
- **Sing or do a tongue twister:** Activate your mind and mouth with something silly to help maintain energy between professional interactions.
- **Learn a vocabulary word or two:** If you're learning a language, take a few moments to learn a new word or phrase and practice your pronunciation. Use an app like Duo to practice a spoken language, or consider practicing [the finger-spelling alphabet of American Sign Language \(ASL\)](#).
- **Tend to your indoor or outdoor garden:** If possible, engage with nature to give your mind and body a rest from screen time.
- **Write a handwritten note that you can then drop in the mail:** Take time to connect with those you care about that doesn't involve screens of any kind. If you enjoy arts and crafts, [consider folding your own envelopes](#) to make use of the materials you have available.
- **Color, draw, or doodle:** Find a way to engage your hands and your creativity between meetings. If drawing helps you focus, consider doodling during meetings when you begin to feel yourself losing focus. Studies show that some individuals focus better when they are able to engage their hands through activities such as drawing, knitting, or sewing.

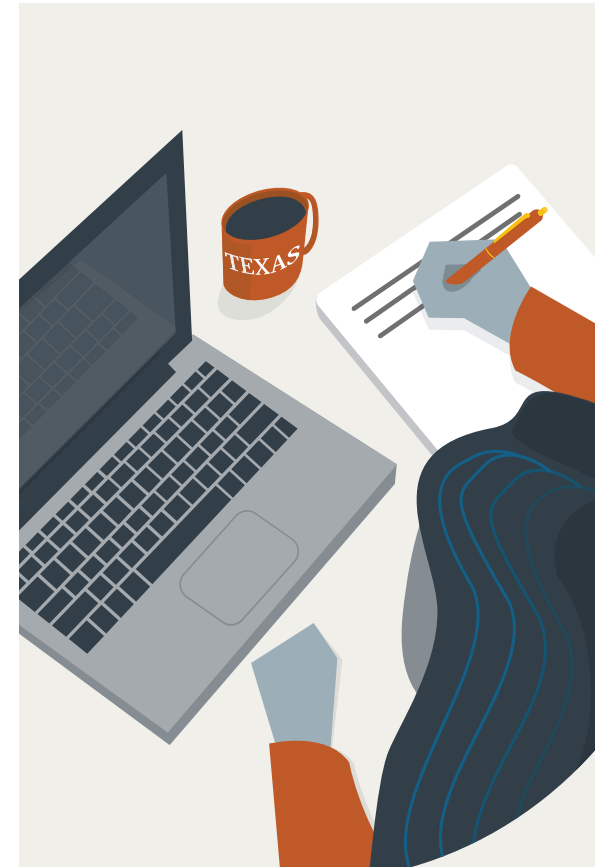


Zoom Breaks: (cont.)

- **Actively monotask as much as possible** – We are programmed to multitask whenever we can, and multitasking becomes easier when everything we need to do is on the computer (i.e. meetings, classes, workshops, teaching, checking emails, writing, researching). This can cause us to feel exhausted more quickly. If you feel that your attention is scattered, schedule time to monotask. For example, take a walk and just enjoy nature rather than also listening to a podcast, music, or meditation. (Redd)

Inside the Zoom Room:

- **Check-in with those in the room (including yourself!):** Take a few moments to check-in with participants and affirm their feelings. You might reserve time to ask people to share how they are doing before moving on to your agenda or lesson plans. Here are some ways you can maximize feedback even when time is limited:
 - Create a Sli.do word cloud and ask participants to enter 1-3 words describing how they are feeling. Acknowledge and address the responses and ask how you can help participants feel better supported. If necessary, redirect some time to a self-care ritual.
 - Consider incorporating a breathing exercise or short guided meditation to collaboratively practice mindfulness and gather energy for the work ahead.
- **Consider your curriculum design to make Zoom work for your lesson plan:** Reserve synchronous class and meetings time for highly interactive activities, Q&A sessions, and other forms of engagement. If information can be shared asynchronously through a previously circulated agenda, Panopto lectures or videos, or Canvas discussion boards and announcements, do not use class or meeting times to deliver this content. Instead, consider a flipped classroom model that will allow you to devote time to maximizing student participation and active learning. Be mindful of how much asynchronous content you assign and try to keep the materials concise and limited to the amount of time you would normally reserve to delivering this content in your lesson plan. As one Fordham professor's student astutely observed in Spring 2020, "Asynchronous content is just a fancy word for homework." (Stone). Your students will likely feel this way, and too much asynchronous work may lead them to experience other forms of burnout.
- **Avoid multitasking:** Though it may be tempting to do so, avoid checking your email or phone while on Zoom. Give those around you your undivided attention and turn off notifications during meetings or classes. This will help you maintain energy and focus.
- **Try using the "hide self-view" feature on Zoom:** If you find yourself distracted by your view on Zoom, [you can hide your video from your screen](#). The other participants in your Zoom meeting will still be able to see you, but you can focus your energy on looking around the Zoom room. If possible, "make eye contact" with the individual speaking by looking at their view as they speak. This will help simulate the type of shifting attention that happens in meetings.



Inside the Zoom Room: (cont.)

Suggestions For Your Students

- **Consider using “speaker view” in large meetings or classes:** If you find it exhausting to constantly scan faces on the gallery view of Zoom, consider using “speaker view.” This will give your eyes and brain a break from tracking. Over Zoom, we “read” people in different ways since we are missing cues (body language, gestures, tones, even sounds when we are muted). Using speaker view allows us to minimize how many times we search for cues from others during a call and helps us focus on the person who is unmuted and speaking.
- **Follow the 20/20/20 Rule:** To help prevent eye strain and headaches, follow the 20/20/20 rule recommended by ophthalmologist Dr. Jeff Anshel. After 20 minutes of looking at a computer screen, spend at least 20 seconds looking at something that is about 20 feet away. If you are organizing your lesson plan or meeting agenda, consider organizing different activities to run 20 minutes or less to help build in some of these breaks.
- **Computer Posture and Ergonomics:** Consider following these [tips from the UK National Health Services \(NHS\)](#) to ensure that you are maintaining healthy and sustainable postures.
 - The NHS recommends that you keep your screen at eye level and try not to look down at your laptop. Consider placing your laptop on top of a stack of books or board games to elevate your screen appropriately.
 - Consider wearing blue light glasses to minimize the negative impact of computer screen reflections.
 - Avoid wearing bifocals while working on a computer.
 - Rest your feet on the floor and sit up straight. Sit in a chair that provides proper back support.



How to Engage Students and Reduce Student Fatigue Over Zoom:

The following suggestions have been offered by faculty members currently teaching over Zoom including professors at the University of Texas at Austin, Yale University, and Fordham University:

- **Offer the option of calling in even if they can't Zoom in:** While it's understandable to ask students and colleagues to keep their cameras on during Zoom sessions, cultivate an environment where they know it's better to call in even if they can't Zoom in. A student who does not normally experience wifi or tech issues that would preclude them from keeping their video on might be feeling Zoom fatigue and may be more likely to choose not to attend class if they don't feel up to keeping their cameras on. Indicate that while engagement and community building are always priorities, their mental health and continued presence in learning spaces are also essential.

How to Engage Students and Reduce Student Fatigue Over Zoom (cont.):

- **Use multiple means of engagement to maintain the momentum of the conversation:** Whenever possible, consider using the features of Zoom to facilitate conversations and avoid extended silences. Participants are likely to feel fatigued more quickly if they are looking for cues from others - such as facial expressions, hand raising, muting and unmuting - to regulate the conversation. Instead, consider using some of the following Zoom features to maintain momentum:
 - [Zoom chat](#): Ask for students to type responses to posed questions or one-minute papers in the chat box to solicit diverse responses quickly.
 - [Non-verbal feedback](#): Ask students to use the thumbs up and down feature or the "yes" and "no" buttons to check-in quickly. (i.e. "Would you like me to explain this concept another way?")
 - [Zoom polling](#): This is another great way to quickly solicit feedback, and you can adjust the poll settings to allow students to share their responses anonymously.
 - [Zoom whiteboard](#): Give students permissions to annotate the whiteboard if you wish to create a collaborative visual and encourage engagement even when students cannot see peers in the gallery view.
 - [Zoom breakout rooms](#): Give students space to talk through ideas with partners or in a small group just as you would in an in-person discussion section.
 - If possible, minimize the amount of time you spend screen sharing or lecturing. Choose to use Zoom features that maximize student engagement and active learning.
- **Consider Asking Students or Colleagues to Remain Unmuted:** While this may not be feasible for large classes or in scenarios when participants are concerned about background noise and feedback, consider extending the offer to those who are able and comfortable with unmuting themselves to do so. This will help restore elements of in-person classroom interactions that can be lost over Zoom, such as laughter, comments, or informal questions. This may help build community and make Zoom interactions less exhausting overall.
- **Ask Students to Consider Participating More than they Might Otherwise:** Be transparent about the fact that discussions may be even more difficult to maintain in the virtual classroom than in-person and ask your students to be willing to speak up even more than they might otherwise. Ask your students what you can do to support them in this move to sustained active engagement, and incorporate their suggestions.
- **Be flexible and use icebreakers, energizers, and check-ins:** If your class seems to be particularly low energy, consider taking a few moments to incorporate an energizer to boost energy and participation levels. Though we often use the terms energizer, icebreaker, and check-in interchangeably, they are different activities that serve different purposes (Coleman). Determine which practice or combination of practices will be most helpful with your students at this point in the semester.



How to Engage Students and Reduce Student Fatigue Over Zoom: (cont.)

- Be flexible and use icebreakers, energizers, and check-ins: (cont.)

- **Icebreakers** help individuals get to know each other and buy into the purpose of the event or course. They may include introductions and are intended to promote community building. Examples of icebreakers might include asking participants to share:
 - Where they are from
 - What they study
 - What they hope to get out of the course this semester
 - What their favorite restaurant in Austin is
- **Check-ins** give participants an opportunity to pause and reflect on how they are feeling in the present moment. They may include structured written or spoken reflection opportunities or breathing exercises. Check-ins are helpful in moments when you wish to acknowledge stressors or external factors that may be impeding your students' ability to engage with course content or for each other. Examples of check-ins might include:
 - "Let's take one minute to practice deep breathing before we get started today. I'll count aloud if you'd like to follow along."
 - "I'd like everyone to share one or two words describing how they are feeling today. Let's go around the room. Does anyone feel comfortable getting the conversation started?"
- **Energizers** are activities used in workshops and group situations to help participants feel more alert and active. You may use them at the beginning of class or in the middle of class to transition from lecture to discussion. You can tailor energizer activities and questions to your field and course content, but you may find some examples below:
 - Google who won the Nobel Prize in "x" field the year you were born and share it in the chat.
 - Who is your favorite scientist/author/researcher?
 - Now that we've reviewed Linnaeus's classification system, Google and share the full taxonomic name of your favorite animal, plant, or fungi in the chat box.
 - Before we analyze this poem together, I'd like for everyone to type out his/her/their favorite word, phrase, or line. Then, I'll ask for a few volunteers to share why they found this section so appealing.
 - Take 2-3 minutes to look up one of the precedents discussed in this case and then briefly share how it relates to our conversation today. You may type a response in the chat or unmute yourself to contribute your thoughts.
 - Type out the first effective advertising slogan or song that comes to mind. Then we will talk through why these examples stand out and what patterns we see.
 - If you could learn how to perfectly cook any dish quickly and perfectly every time, which dish would you choose?
 - If it were possible to travel anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?
 - What are some ways in which you encounter this topic/method in your daily life



Resources:

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