The new normal: video meetings, mental health and anxiety

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Edited by Linnea Wallen

August 2020

Abstract

This research briefing evaluates the impact of online meetings upon mental health and inequality in the wake of COVID-19. Over the last few months, People Know How have effectively adapted all their work and services to continue running throughout the pandemic. Therefore, understanding the impact of the shift to online meetings is important to continue working productively without sacrificing the wellbeing of staff, VIPs (volunteers, interns and placement students) or service users. The briefing highlights three types of negative impacts: social, cognitive and general. Overall, it shows that online meetings have the ability to worsen anxiety and mental health and exacerbate existing inequalities. However, there are similarly benefits to online meetings. Particularly, these are felt by people who experience that they struggle with in-person communication. Some key solutions to address difficulties that online meetings are also presented. These include effective time-management, maintenance of breaks between meetings, introduction of codes of conduct and an overall flexibility towards wellbeing. Ultimately, the evidence shows that while online meetings have a number of negative impacts on mental health and inequality, we have the ability and responsibility, both as organisations and as individuals, to mediate them as best we can.

Keywords

Online meetings, COVID-19, zoom fatigue, mental health, anxiety

Key points

- Online meetings present several cognitive, social, and general risks towards individual mental health

- Online meetings can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities such as the unequal balance of domestic labour for women in the home.

- Online meetings have allowed us to stay connected during a time of isolation.

- There are numerous simple steps which can be taken by organisations and individuals to mediate the negatives such as enforcing breaks between meetings and introducing codes of conduct.

Introduction

On the 23rd of March 2020, the United Kingdom went into lockdown in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, our professional and social lives rapidly moved almost entirely online, forcing us to quickly adapt to a new working and living environment. This transition has had varied effects upon people's mental health and has fundamentally changed the ways we live our lives. Therefore, understanding how to live and work online, whilst managing concerns for mental health and inequality, has become necessary to maintain wellbeing and productivity for both individuals and organisations. Indeed, People Know How have shifted their workplace and services online, meaning that safeguarding the wellbeing of staff, VIPs (volunteers, interns and placement students), and service users in this new environment is a priority. This research briefing examines the shift to online meetings and will identify the risks they present towards wellbeing and inequality. These fall into three categories: cognitive risks, social risks and general risks. The briefing then explores the positives of switching to working online and the value of online meetings. Lastly, a threefold approach to minimising the negative effects of online work will be outlined, dealing with each type of risk. Since we are only coming out of the first wave of this pandemic, there is limited academic literature on this topic. Therefore, several referenced sources are either 'soft literature' or older academic journal articles holding applicable information. While all the information included is relevant and informative, we are living in a unique time; the long-term consequences of which are yet to be known and documented. As such, this briefing presents an overview of public consensus rather than of confirmed answers. Overall, it highlights that the shift to online meetings creates many risks for mental health and inequality for all those participating in online meetings. However, there are also many ways by which organisations, such as People Know How, can mediate these risks.

Cognitive Factors: Zoom fatigue

Online meetings present a unique challenge for our brains and can place strain on our mental health. Often referred to as 'zoom fatigue' (Sklar, 2020), many have identified a feeling of exhaustion that comes from repeated online meetings on any platform. This is identified as resting on the idea of Continuous Partial Attention (CPA), which is engaged when your brain maintains constant active attention on many different things at once out of a desire, conscious or subconscious, not to miss anything significant (Rose, 2010). Whilst in a video call, the brain maintains CPA on each person's video to interpret the non-verbal cues sent out by each caller (Rochat and Zahavi, 2011). Maintenance of CPA for long periods of time can create anxiety and requires a large amount of focus, leading to zoom fatigue. Indeed, Small and Vorgan (2008) highlight that, when maintaining CPA, people keep their system in "a heightened state of stress" (p. 47). This is significant as the type of function online meetings require from our brains is one that is inherently anxiety provoking. Alongside this, Sklar (2020) identifies that despite paying CPA, video calls limit the ability of the brain to pick up and interpret non-verbal

cues, which are crucial within social interaction. This creates the sensation of working very hard but achieving nothing, as the brain maintains CPA to keep up despite receiving far less information than normal. This further contributes to zoom fatigue and can leave people feeling tired and drained and, ultimately, negatively impact their wellbeing (Sklar, 2020). This cognitive strain and its negative effect upon individual wellbeing can be experienced by anyone engaged in video meetings and, thus, is highly relevant for People Know How and other organisations to in light of team meetings having moved online.

Cognitive factors: Self-perception

During a video call, the interface gives you the ability to see yourself as well as the others on the call. This sees us confronted with our own appearance and left subject to our own self-perception. Rochat and Zahavi (2011) argue that self- experience is universally disconcerting; that being confronted with the external identifier of your "self" is unsettling and can provoke anxiety. Moreover, your own appearance can make you feel self-conscious and hyper-aware of yourself, as if under a spotlight, thus forcing you to actively control your behaviour at all times (Sanders and Bauman, 2020). Indeed, it has been found that 59% of adults are more self-conscious on camera in a video meeting than in real life (Highfive, 2016). Alongside this, it has been found that we have heightened emotional responses to viewing our own emotions, especially distressing emotions (Vergallito et al., 2020). The visual experience of your own

stress or anxiety can contribute further to the negative impact upon mental health by causing heightened distress. Arguably, this can exacerbate inequalities, as those with pre-existing mental health conditions often struggle particularly with self-image. Moreover, Robert (2020) notes that women are subject to a great deal of pressure to be presentable and, thus, may struggle more when confronted with their own image. This issue presents implications across diverse online services, as employees and service users alike are engaged online meetings and may struggle with their own self image as a result. People Know How supports many vulnerable adults and young people through their Positive Transitions Service and Reconnect service, and these are groups which may struggle with confidence and self-esteem. Therefore, this factor is important for People Know How and other organisations supporting vulnerable individuals to address, to safeguard the wellbeing of such service users and make sure their engagement and confidence-building with these services far outweighs any possibility of a negative impact on self-esteem.

Social factors: Social norms

Online meetings have required us to quickly adapt to a new set of social norms and rules that can have implications for mental health and inequality (Smith, 2020). Indeed, to negotiate professional, social, and educational communication in a new environment where non-verbal cues are eliminated, a significant change in behaviour is required. The existence

of shared norms is widely regarded to hold society together and make social relationships easier to navigate, whereas disrupting them can create feelings of anxiety (Riley 2015). Fry (2020) highlights that online meetings protrude into our homes and that there are no established norms of behaviour surrounding to what degree our lives should be visible. For instance, queries surrounding whether or not you can eat during a meeting, what clothes are appropriate, if children, pets or spouses can be visible or what constitutes an acceptable background, can create much uncertainty and anxiety in both social and professional contexts. Moreover, unclear social norms lead to miscommunication or misinterpretation. In 2014, Schoenenberg et al. found that any delay above 1.2 seconds in a phone call made the speaker perceive the listener as "less attentive, friendly or active" (p. 486). Although their study focused on phone calls, it clearly highlights the way our social norms often do not translate into remote interaction and can negatively impact our mental health. This issue also has significant consequences for inequality in the workplace, where the voices of women and minorities are often not heard or systematically undermined (Opportunity Now, 2014; Starr-Glass, 2018). With a change in norms and no defined new norms we may fall back on established prejudices. Notably, it has been identified that men often dominate conversations, are often more willing to interrupt and control the topic whereas women fall back into a faciliatory role (Pakzadian and Tootkaboni, 2018). Lack of clarity around who speaks could exacerbate this problem, seeing women's voices go unheard. The notion of changing social norms in group interactions is important to take into consideration when working in an online environment, as uncertainty within group interactions has the potential to negatively affect mental health and exacerbate existing inequalities.

Social Factors: Work-life separation

Moreover, the shift to online meetings has in many cases minimised our ability to separate work and rest (Fry, 2020; Jing, 2020). Davis and Green (2020) identify that rather than freeing up time, online meetings have stretched the working day; with the average working day in the UK having increased by two hours on average since the start of the pandemic. Furthermore, a survey carried out on 1,001 US workers shows that, after the introduction of 'shelter in place' orders, by the beginning of April around 45% of workers felt 'burnt out' (Davis and Green, 2020). This evidence is valuable as it highlights the importance of maintaining balance in safeguarding the wellbeing of employees. Work-life separation (or lack thereof) also has implications for inequality. It is important to note that the pandemic is not an equaliser; we are all having very different experiences. At a micro level, those with children are struggling more to maintain balance. At a macro level women and minorities are systematically less able to separate their work and home lives. Those living in poor housing conditions, disproportionately people of colour (UK Government, 2020), are going to have more difficulties in maintaining separation between home and work, and thus be subject to greater anxiety. Alongside this, according to the ILO (2018), women carry out 76.2% of unpaid

care work globally. Many women will thereby be balancing working from home with an unequal share of domestic labour making work-life balance impossible to maintain. While this type of inequality is impossible for individual organisations to solve, it is important to be aware of. In lieu of a solution, honouring the experiences of minorities will ensure organisations do not contribute further to the negative impact upon wellbeing.

General Factors: COVID-19 anxiety

The experience of the pandemic is undeniably one characterised by uncertainty and anxiety, which can negatively impact upon mental health. In a recent US based study, Fitzpatrick et al. (2020) found that moderate to high anxiety symptoms were reported by over 25% of their sample. The same study found that COVID-19 fear specifically related to the experience of depression and anxiety; with those who experience more COVID-19 fear also experiencing more mental ill-health symptoms (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). This has implications for productivity and focus, as poor executive functioning and lack of motivation are highly linked to the experience of mental health issues. This fear, again, sat down existing lines of inequality and was experienced in the highest levels by women, people in ethnic minority groups and the unemployed (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Thomson, 2020; Williams, 2020). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the experience of this pandemic can provoke anxiety and that this collective experience is fundamentally unequal across different socio-economic groups. As such, it is crucial to adjust expectations to safeguard the wellbeing of both service users and employees.

Benefits of online communication

In some cases, the transition to online work has reportedly reduced anxiety levels and improved wellbeing. For those who struggle to read social cues and cope with unexpected change, the shift to online meetings can make interaction easier to navigate (Sklar, 2020). Online communication is defined as being non-verbal and controllable (Schouten et al., 2007). This gives people, who struggle with these particular aspects of in-person social life, the ability to mediate difficulties to some extent. It has similarly been noted that those with social anxiety can find online communication far easier than in-person communication and find themselves being more socially forthcoming and comfortable online (Weidman et al., 2012). Moreover, Sanders and Bauman (2020) identifies that online meetings reduce physical characteristics which can be social determinants of dominance, such as height. In this way, online meetings have the ability to reduce inequality in these aspects. Overall, the greatest benefit of online communication during COVID-19 is that we have the ability to remain connected. Regardless of the weaknesses of the system this connection is vital to our wellbeing and functioning during this unique time and makes social and professional online meetings a necessity.

Addressing online meeting concerns

When dealing with problems rooted in our cognition, addressing zoom fatigue and self-consciousness is key. Several sources recommended making camera-use optional, turning it on only while speaking or to simply take some meetings to over phone call (Lufkin, 2020; Robert, 2020). The need for short effective meetings, with a streamlined agenda and strong facilitation to maintain focus and prevent meetings dragging, has similarly been suggested (Sixt, 2020). Scheduling in breaks between meetings has also been noted as important, as back to back meetings allow the brain no time to refocus and come down from its place of CPA (Degges-White, 2020; Hood, 2020; Lufkin, 2020).

To address issues based in social factors, instituting clear codes of conduct and routines has been identified as the way to replace the social norms that are lacking online. Examples of these include: keeping everyone muted, using a hands up system to manage interruptions, a specific greeting and sign off and acknowledging and/or introducing each individual as they enter the meeting (Robert, 2020). Codes of conduct can also make expectations in terms of dress, background and etiquette surrounding family members and food explicit. A separation between social and work conversations may be beneficial, which can be encouraged by scheduling different kinds of meetings with different levels of formality (Degges-White, 2020). Encouraging work-life separation is similarly recommended (Forbes, 2020;

Hood, 2020) whilst also remaining aware that not everyone has the luxury of separate work-life space and time. This can be supported by holding no expectation of communication outside of work hours. Moreover, to combat power dynamics and unequal participation, ensuring that all voices are heard, can be helped by having an assigned mediator in all meetings.

Lastly, when dealing with general problems in the context of COVID-19, a key strategy is being flexible with expectations of productivity in employees and concentration in service users. Equally important is, as previously mentioned, being aware of that the circumstances of every individual are different (Hickman, 2020; Sugden, 2020). Some organisations have started having conversations about mental health and providing more family leave or sick days, which is one way in which such flexibility can be practically enacted (Davis and Green, 2020; Feinzig, 2020). Although no organisation has the ability to control general stressors, they do have the ability to minimise the anxieties they create through their own online services and meetings. This makes awareness of general stressors highly relevant to organisations like People Know How, that have efficiently and successfully adapted all their services to the online environment since the start of the pandemic. Effectively recognising and being flexible in the light of stress factors is therefore beneficial to maximise wellbeing amongst both employees and service users.

Conclusion

Overall, the 'new normal' has had many negative consequences for mental health, but these are not definitive of online meetings. The strain of maintaining CPA and the challenge of being constantly confronted with our own appearance create cognitive challenges to our wellbeing (Sklar, 2020; Sanders and Bauman, 2020). The complete reconstitution of social norms similarly presents a challenge to mental health (Riley, 2015; Schoenberg et al., 2014) and risks us falling back on established prejudices (Pakzadian and Tootkaboni, 2018). This is furthered by the intrusion of online meetings into our homes and personal lives, the burden of which is felt most greatly by women and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the general backdrop of the global pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and has had wide ranging negative impacts upon mental health worldwide. This in turn has challenged people's ability to work effectively and productively online (Davis and Green, 2020). However, online meetings provide many positives for those who struggle with life and work in person and, fundamentally, the value of being able to work and socialise during lockdown cannot be understated. Therefore, the focus must be upon improving this medium, rather than undermining it. Doing this can involve minimising the strain on our cognition, providing new clear social boundaries that are discerning towards inequality, and providing flexibility and clarity to workers and service users living under a time of intense challenge. Fundamentally there are ways by which organisations like People Know How can continue working and providing services within this new normal, while reducing the possible negative impact of online meetings. The uncertainty under which we live is unlikely to ease in the immediate future. We do, however, have the power to change and increase resilience. We can learn to conduct our new social and professional lives online in a way that challenges existing inequalities and holds the wellbeing of every individual as its central concern.

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