

Virtual meetings tire people because we're doing them wrong, says new research

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New research suggests sleepiness during virtual meetings is caused by

mental underload and boredom. Earlier studies suggested that fatigue from virtual meetings stems from mental overload, but new research from Aalto University shows that sleepiness during virtual meetings might actually be a result of mental underload and boredom.

"I expected to find that people get stressed in remote meetings. But the result was the opposite—especially those who were not engaged in their work quickly became drowsy during remote meetings," says Assistant Professor Niina Nurmi, who led the study.

The researchers measured [heart rate variability](#) during [virtual meetings](#) and face-to-face meetings, examining different types of fatigue experiences among 44 knowledge workers across nearly 400 meetings. The team at Aalto collaborated with researchers at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, where stress and recovery are studied using heart rate monitors. The [paper](#) was published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

"We combined physiological methods with [ethnographic research](#). We shadowed each subject for two workdays, recording all events with time stamps, to find out the sources of human physiological responses," Nurmi says.

The study also included a questionnaire to identify people's general attitude and work engagement.

"The format of a meeting had little effect on people who were highly engaged and enthusiastic about their work. They were able to stay active even during virtual meetings. On the other hand, workers whose work engagement was low and who were not very enthusiastic about their work found virtual meetings very tiring."

It's easier to maintain focus in face-to-face meetings than virtual ones, as

the latter have limited cognitive cues and [sensory input](#). "Especially when cameras are off, the participant is left under-stimulated and may start to compensate by multitasking," Nurmi explains.

Although an appropriate level of stimulation is generally beneficial for the brain, multitasking during virtual meetings is problematic. Only highly automated tasks, such as walking, can be properly carried out during a virtual meeting.

"Walking and other automated activities can boost your [energy levels](#) and help you to concentrate on the meeting. But if you're trying to focus on two things that require cognitive attention simultaneously, you can't hear if something important is happening in the meeting. Alternatively, you have to constantly switch between tasks. It's really taxing for the brain," Nurmi says.

More information: Niina Nurmi et al, Virtual meeting fatigue: Exploring the impact of virtual meetings on cognitive performance and active versus passive fatigue., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000362](https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000362)

Provided by Aalto University

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