

How to handle digital overload

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It didn't take long for Rylee Sargeant to start feeling tired and headachy after she, like everyone else, was forced to work remotely when the pandemic struck in March.

"Lethargic is how I'd describe it," said the 21-year-old University of

Alberta kinesiology student.

She's taking spring courses now and working an online summer job, and that feeling has only intensified as she spends her days hunched over her computer at the kitchen table.

"There's a 'de-realization' effect for me; the world doesn't feel as real right now, the days don't feel distinct from each other," she said.

She's concerned about how being online all the time affects her concentration, and is especially concerned about it for this coming fall, when she starts her fourth year of studies.

"I'm worried I'm not going to do as well academically as I would in a classroom, because of sluggishness, and there's also less opportunity for networking and professional development."

Digital overload

Digital overload is becoming a slog for most people working online, said Ian Gellatly, a professor of organizational behavior with the University of Alberta School of Business.

"People have always been using applications like Skype or Zoom to connect, but it was a choice. It was convenient and cool, but now, being online all the time is just imposed on us, and what used to be a five-minute in-person conversation can now involve 10 emails and most of the morning."

Being online most of the working day, especially for meetings, requires more mental energy and can be exhausting, he said, likening it to a building full of windows.

"Each of those windows represents a channel of unique information that we use to process what someone is telling us, like body language or tone of voice. We've now pulled the curtains on those windows and we have just one left—listening to speech—and it can leave us cognitively overloaded."

Even taking in a screen of multiple faces is draining, he noted.

"It's an unnatural way for humans to interact, especially if people are in meetings all day. We have to pay a lot of attention to make sense of the limited information streams we have."

The pandemic itself is a likely stressor in the context of working online, added U of A psychologist Jason Murray.

"We're talking about things in our daily work that are about coping and having to make adjustments to the situation we all find ourselves in. That takes a lot of energy."

Working from home is also distracting, he added.

"We don't get the natural pauses we get at work, like walking between meetings or getting a coffee. At home, the inclination is to book too many meetings too close together, so we don't get breaks."

Eight ways to cope

1. Take breaks away from the screen. Go for a short walk or do a household chore, Murray recommended. "Get the body moving; it's not designed to sit in front of a screen for eight hours a day."
2. Consider whether you need an online meeting. "If the organizer is doing all the talking, it could be better to do it in an email rather than at a meeting," Murray said. And leaders should ask

for feedback and questions during the meeting. "It gets everyone more engaged and invested, so they're not just passive participants in a monolog."

3. Take breaks during the meeting. When meetings are necessary, the person leading it should let attendees know it is OK to stand up and stretch or take a bathroom or coffee break. "Set some guidelines that make it easier to have a healthier [meeting](#)."
4. Keep it short. Try to limit online meetings to deal with the most important issues that need [group discussion](#), Gellatly advised. Anything longer than 20 minutes should include breaks. Sharing related documents ahead of time also shortens meetings, he noted.
5. Be animated. When speaking, put extra emphasis on your [body language](#) and voice tone so people can see and hear you more easily. "Smile, nod, make the verbal cues stronger," Murray advised.
6. Don't be a distraction. Turn off the camera and hit the mute button during meetings to cut down on video and audio clutter that can be distracting for others, advised Laidlaw. "There's less to process."
7. Avoid multitasking during meetings. Don't check texts, answer emails or try to work on something else, Murray said. "It's a huge mental drain and probably means you're not doing either task very well."
8. Set up informal online group drop-ins that aren't work-related. "Have it unstructured and open so people can share," said Gellatly. "It gives a sense of social support when people are feeling isolated."

Coping with online education stress

The shift to online education poses stressful challenges for students, said Linda Laidlaw, a digital literacy researcher in the U of A's Faculty of

Education.

"Doing just one [online course](#) would be a learning curve, but if they now have to take part in multiple online courses, they have to figure out a lot. And they can feel quite disconnected in online environments."

Students will also be "at the mercy of class schedules," Murray noted. "They don't get to pick the time, so they can't completely plan and control how many meetings they have in a row."

While there are several ways to ease online fatigue, it starts with allowing ourselves time to adjust, he added.

"It's helpful to recognize this is new and we are all trying to figure it out together, so we should shift our expectations."

Students can help their self-care by trying to keep a schedule that includes time away from the screen. "Don't let one day blend into the next," said Murray, who advised keeping a regular sleep schedule and partitioning off study times.

"There's no reason a [student](#) should be working all day and all night at schoolwork. Having a routine helps us make better choices for wellness like getting exercise and eating healthy."

Before classes start, students should test their technology systems to ensure they're working. Check out e-class supports like those offered by the U of A, Laidlaw suggested.

To cut down on screen time, students should take advantage of dictation tools, print out documents or buy physical textbooks they need for class when possible. They can also collaborate with other students or hone their own presentation skills using digital media, Laidlaw suggested. "It's

an opportunity to develop some skills that will serve them well."

For group communications, instructors should use the simplest technology possible, Laidlaw advised. Shift to audio calls or teleconferences, or offer some course activities through audio only. "Then there's only one kind of communication mode to process."

When possible, instructors should also simplify activities, Laidlaw suggested. "Poll students instead of having an online class discussion about a question. This can help with focus."

Instructors should set up structures students can use to check in to ask questions during online classes, Laidlaw said. "Provide a way for students to speak up as they would in an in-person class."

Teachers may also want to reach out to students who haven't been accessing class lately, Laidlaw said.

"It's important to build some sense of community where people are checking in on each other a bit."

Provided by University of Alberta

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