

## Zooming Along in the Pandemic and Beyond

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May 18, 2020

Just within the last week, a plethora of articles has sprung up about the effects of screens and Zoom. We seem to have reached a moment in this crisis when our attention has shifted a tiny bit away from the latest figures about who and where is being touched by this pandemic. Now, we have room to sense more about how we are being with what is, in this particular moment.

We are writing this particularly to support our tribe of therapists, most of whom are doing what is being called “telehealth.” For many, it is a strange new world, fraught with rules and codes, concerns about doing evidence-based practice online, adjusting to different ways of attending, and long hours sitting before computers. It seems important to begin with kindness toward ourselves in the midst of so much professional challenge.

Opening to the bigger picture, being in the midst of a pandemic where our leaders are often times contributing to the layers of fear, uncertainty, and unkindness, our systems are already likely enduring wave after wave of high and low stress. We are having our own reactions to being asked to stay at home and change so many of our routines. Because of all this, we begin this new way of connecting with our clients far from our usual level playing field. Many of us have noticed how tired we are, likely from the new challenges and the array of uncertainties, as well as the different kind of concentration that Zoom requires.

Then the articles and newscasts arrive: “Why Zoom is Terrible,” “How to Combat Zoom Fatigue,” and “How to Fight Zoom Fatigue.” Language is important (terrible, combat, fight, fatigue) and the assumptions in these titles can set our nervous system on edge even more. Since we are likely having some challenges, it is easy to immediately align with the articles’ explanations for why Zoom sucks. Then after several conversations with colleagues who also resonate with this, the sensation of Zoom resistance is firmly in place.

There may be a different way to go about this. To begin, it *is* important to acknowledge what the science says about the effect of out-of-sync sound and visuals, dropped calls, struggles with eye contact (although this is so much better with Zoom and some other platforms than the earlier ones), and loss of full-body attending. These ruptures are real and sometimes require repeated repairs during a single session. It is also helpful to understand that those of us who are just beginning to do work this way are in the process of building a whole new set of neural nets in regard to how we are attending. That is hard work and it will likely get easier over time. In just the last two weeks, I am hearing from several colleagues that the strain is becoming less. We may also begin with a general dislike for screens that can set up resistance in us. Just pushing against that all day is taxing.

With all this in mind, how do we create a context in which we can find the resources in our online sessions and not just the frustrations and liabilities. How do we relate to and with Zoom in a way that supports more ease?

Susan here:

#### Working with Groups

After an in-person conference was cancelled, a large systems-centered group of 75 people who had been planning to be together in the conference worked together via Zoom. In our first meeting, the group worked to lower anxiety with each person first naming their anxiety-provoking thoughts and, in turn, the next person speaking, reflecting what the previous speaking person had said and then adding their own anxiety-provoking thought. This process of reflecting built a here-and-now connection and activated ventral vagal relating. Midway through, several members predicted that they were going to feel worse after the group instead of better. Yet as the work continued and each member's anxiety was reflected, the anxiety eased as the reflections provided the coregulation so vital for all of us as humans, helping the anxiety lower for the whole group. By the end, the whole group felt better able to live in the multiple unknowns that had been named, and had compassion for the human pull to the negative predictions that activated the sympathetic arousal.

A month later, this same large group met again and very quickly began exploring the frustration and irritation with working on Zoom, initially focusing on the connection they could not have in this platform and their frustration about this. As this frustrated subgroup worked together, reflecting each other and building, they were co-regulating the sympathetic activation brought on by their frustration. This led to recognizing a fork between exploring frustration about what was not possible or exploring how to have more of what one could in the Zoom context. The latter subgroup began working and movingly explored reaching out with their hands toward each other to feel more of the connection. There was tenderness and warmth in these gestures, and the whole subgroup exploring this was quite touched.

I've noticed something else with other groups that have moved online. At least two of them have discovered a new freedom from repeating their interpersonal past in the group. They described feeling freer of their old protective survivor roles and more able to participate as here-and-now members. It may be that this small amount of distance or the absence of the social interactions prior to group starting made it less likely that the implicit past roles would be triggered, leaving room for greater safety with each other in the here-and-now work of the group.

Bonnie here:

### Working with Individuals

I am having the privilege of working with several therapists individually about the challenges and potentials for them of doing therapy via Zoom these days. We begin each conversation by exploring and acknowledging what he or she is experiencing right now. Here are some patterns we consistently discovered. Coming to online work with resistance is activating their sympathetic nervous systems. Being in a state of neuroception of danger all day is exhausting in and of itself. It also attenuates or completely erases any sense of nurturing connection for them in relation to their clients. I also heard, "Well, Zoom is better than nothing," said in a resigned tone from a number of colleagues. That sense of defeat or resentment keeps us out of ventral vagal, too. No wonder we are tired and often feeling a flight response.

Once we acknowledge this and many other concerns, we can begin to explore ways we might enter into relationship with Zoom differently. How can we return to a neuroception of safety? With most of our people, we come to online work having previously built attachments with them. Just the sight of their faces has some potential of awakening that connection within both people. The attachment bond is built into the bodies of therapist and client, just waiting to support us by providing warm sensations of mutual care. Social baseline theory tells us that in trusting relationships, coming together reduces amygdala activation in both people. If we were to come online with our attachment bond being our primary focus, imagine how soothing it might feel to see those precious faces. But we can only fully see them if we are in a ventral state ourselves. One way to get there is through experiencing gratitude for this possibility of connection. We might begin to feel that if we imagine what it would have been like 30 years ago without being able to see each other in this way. A felt sense of gratefulness changes so many aspects of our system including the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, bringing on feelings of contentment. Ventral might also arise if we focus on the internal reality of our nourishing connection with this person just before we get online. We might also stimulate a sense of well-being by enjoying nature outside our window or petting the dog. Each of us has our particular ways of finding that neuroception of safety that brings ventral alive in us.

As yeast for stimulating our own creative ways of settling our systems, I want to share what a friend and colleague of mine, Lupe Murray, offered about her rituals with online work. "I have developed some new rhythms before, during, and between sessions. I have set up my space for sessions with care, being mindful of what my clients view is from their perspective. I have images that might be nurturing/relaxing to them like an image of

mountains and another of a waterfall. I have also set up my space so that I can look out the window at the trees just over my computer. Before the session begins, I have a warm cup of tea or water that I set by my computer which helps me stay hydrated. When I sit down for my session, I put a weighted blanket on my lap that helps me literally feel grounded/embodied in a way that is needed for being on the screen. I have found that my clients feel that I can really see them and have better eye contact when we take a moment to adjust our screens so that our heads are higher, closer to the camera, so that we have the kind of eye contact that most replicates that in person eye contact/gazing. On my desk, I have scripture or inspirational reading so I can pick up and read a few words to feed/nurture my soul between calls. After finishing, I stand up and orient my eyes to the larger environment around me, perhaps go to the bathroom, walk, or stretch a bit. That small break for my eyes and body is helping a great deal to show up refreshed and embodied for each session.”

Rich here:

#### A Pre-Pandemic Online Tale

A few years back I began working with a man in therapy. After meeting in my office a few times, it became clear that sessions would need to be on Zoom due to health concerns.

In our first Zoom session, I headed toward my computer, turning my back to my therapy sitting area, and feeling alone, opened my computer. This was new for me at that time, and I felt hesitant and awkward. I tried to reframe these feelings by telling myself that this shift in our work was a necessity, though I felt the weight of an anticipated loss of the best of in-person work together.

Over time, I discovered a surprising and rewarding place to hang my Zoom hat. Some of my more colorful, tender, and yes, meaningful memories of our work over nearly three years happened over the internet. How did I square this with my view that ‘in-person’ is beyond comparison?

Framing Zoom sessions as offering less dimensionality than the more efficacious in-person ones missed an important distinction. Rather than pitting them against each other, it seems more useful to hold them as essentially different. This perspective might open up explorations as to how they are different, under what contexts, towards what goals? Pluses and minuses of each could lie on both sides of a ledger. That’s my hope.

In the case of this man, I was being invited into his home, satisfying my curiosity about his fuller life beyond my office. Even though working this way had started as a necessity, we found that we were able to develop an even higher neuroception of safety and engagement over time.

During one session, his very young daughter ambled unaware into his Zoom room. Her age, his devotion, her innocently interrupting, his patience in stopping our work to engage her was one of my special (and highly therapeutic) moments.

To the two of them, it was life as usual. I saw and sensed something else. These precious and prescient moments can't be planned, similar to the heart of so many moments of our lives. This change of context on Zoom shifted everything into a lived moment of connection with their larger life together.

I didn't see her on the screen that morning session on Zoom. But I heard her sweet "Daddy?" voice and felt even warmer towards her as I'd heard many stories of her love for all animals, as well as her already confident, feisty ways of ensuring she was treated well by others. But I was absorbed by his face, fully engaged, his voice a match for her wish for contact. I was fully and quietly attending to him as he was with her. I was grateful for each pause and softening of the moment as well as his tender eyes as he attended patiently to her. Less than a minute later, she was on to her next curious adventure as she closed the door on her way out. Seeing his engaged nervous system with her, through his face, voice, and upper body, taught me more about him than anything we could have discussed, once removed, in person. I knew the significance because my own body aligned with their connection.

It seems unlikely that such a similar enough moment in my office could have replicated what happened inside me. By becoming a fly on their wall, and breathing in their lived and spontaneous if simple moment together I learned more fully about this man. The tentacles to other parts of his life, challenges and successes made new sense as my own nervous system was gifted - unimpeded through time and space.

Another time during the wintery season he sat in his home office chair with a black, warming vest on. As we worked, I saw a small movement within the vest, which I ignored. Then a little black furry ear poked out. In my startle I defended inside by wondering if it was voyeuristic to keep watching for what might come next. His beloved 6-pound puppy crawled up and out, I guess to see what could be more important than he. I thought, who was being warmed? Of course, both. Better yet, all three of us.

This reminds me of the language of some groups, another area of fascination and commitment during my career. Across the room might emerge a member-to-member exchange, "I feel touched by you remembering how hard it is for me when my partner is out of town for

more than a few days.” Touched? But no physical contact. Yet without question all of us in the group knew how thoroughly affected she was. And that touched was not a metaphor.

So yes, I was warmed as I breathed in and embodied this relational puppy-love moment that was embraced within the full context of their life together.

Previously, this beloved furry pup had indeed come to my office, would diligently sniff and survey the entire perimeter along the walls of my office to ensue all was safe before he would take up his spot on his cushion at my client’s feet, spending equal time looking unwaveringly at one, and then the other of us, weaving our relationship as a whole.

These moments are precious also. Essentially, how do we come into relationship with each other? As suggested earlier, Zoom and in-person moments are similar yet importantly different. What might be seen as a difference is the particular ways we come into relationship. What’s similar is that we are sustainably changed, not better nor worse, as we progress across different contexts.

While there is a bit of research saying that clients also hate online work (I wonder what questions were asked), other research and most anecdotal evidence says that our clients mostly feel so grateful for the regularity of contact with a safe and often beloved person. One client said, “I get to invite you into my house! Now you will always live here in some way.” Another says, “Everything feels jumbled and unpredictable, but you come here every Tuesday at 10:00 and that steadies me.” One six-year old, transitioning to doing play therapy online, invited her sister in so the two of them and her dear therapist could play dress-up. A teenager was able to give his counselor an in-person tour of the room he had created to honor his favorite astronomers. At the other end of the spectrum, our hearts may sometimes break as we gain a deeper sense of the struggles a person has to deal with at home – poverty, shaming interruptions, a depression so deep she can’t get out of bed. While being able to hold all this requires so much of us, our client’s sense of being known may deepen in ways that are only possible through this medium. In all cases, if we can let go of trying to make these sessions be like the ones in the office, there is no telling what wonders might emerge.

A number of people are finding the logistics are easier, experiencing relief in not having to drive to get to their appointments or make their way home after a challenging session (something that is also true for us therapists). As Susan noted in groups, some individuals feel safer with a bit of distance and are doing deeper work than ever. Others do struggle with missing a hug or just the sensation of being in the room together. If we are able to hold that with tender care, it may well be an opening to doing some deep work around other times of missing contact. This is maybe not much of a stretch if we have been practicing from

the viewpoint that everything that comes into the room, including ruptures, is meaningful and excellent food for therapy.

Summing up, where attention goes, so goes neural firing. When we approach the screen with gratitude and lean into the reality of our internalized connection with each other, we have a good probability of falling into nurturing ventral relationship. When we relax our expectations of what might happen in this particular hour of connection, we are more open to following our clients. People have told me they feel far less tired at the end of the day when this begins to happen. A few have said that there are so many benefits that they are not looking forward to resuming in person work, and are hearing this from some of their people as well.

This is still a new way of working for many of us, and we need to honor the needs that arise from that. With that in mind, here is another reminder to monitor how our bodies are adapting to sitting more still for more hours, gazing into a screen. When we couple this difference with the anxieties and uncertainties that are as much part of our daily world as our clients', special tending of these precious bodies may be needed. Do we need to schedule in times to go for an extended walk or stretch? Do we need a nap mid-day? Do we need to be aware of tension developing around our eyes and make sure they get a cucumber bath at the end of the day? Is the chair comfortable? Might it help most of all to have a fellow online buddy with whom to share what it was like this day? There is nothing quite like the settling we feel when we are deeply heard and held in the full range of our emotions.

All of this is about finding ways in the midst of so much change to lean into what we know and experience about the power of nurturing connection to support health of body, mind, and soul. When we are able to work from a more ventral space online, we are even fostering a healthy immune system. A sense of safety is potentially built in to working in this way because we can't be infecting each other. Finally, it is important to keep acknowledging what we are actually experiencing through the day – the moments of frustration with the platforms, the times when screen hatred creeps in, the days when we are simply tired and overwhelmed by our own reaction to the pandemic. Trying to force these inner realities aside will only create more tension. Instead, sharing this with a trustworthy someone can ease the burden. None of what is offered here is expected to simply shift us into gratitude and that's the end of every other response. All that is being asked of us is that we experiment by entering into our relationship with this experience a little differently than ever before and lean into our internal and external sources of support to discover what is possible - then be prepared to be surprised.