

Live vs. Simulated Live (video and audio) Meetings

I truly enjoy the way [Brené Brown](#)'s brain works and in her book, "[Braving the Wilderness](#)" she reminds us that humans have related to one another in small groups - human-to-human, face-to-face - for thousands of years. Only recently have we begun substituting this for electronic means and our headlong dive into virtual meetings during this crisis seem to have substituted one for another almost entirely. Brené credits the esteemed social scientist, [Susan Pinker](#), for concluding that *"there is no substitute for social interaction. They are proven to bolster our immune system, sending positive hormones surging through our bloodstream and brain, and help us live longer."*

In my work, at Above and Beyond, I witness Susan Pinker's conclusion about the value of physical presence in action every single day. Our main activity consists of running face-to-face meetings back-to-back all day long and our constituencies, primarily our addiction treatment patients but also peers and colleagues, consider this in-person work urgent, necessary, and irreplaceable above all other means. To them, these meetings are lifesaving. Our patients are trying to escape isolation and the ravages that loneliness has wrought on their psyches. They visually see, and viscerally experience, the incredible value of being in the physical presence of others and beg us to continue. They regularly say such things as *"Please don't ever take away these in person sessions or replace them with online sessions"* and we have obliged them.

Our patients each walk through our doors with their own version of *"give me a connection to someone who will pay attention to me, who'll let me show up in their life"*. This seems to be at the root of most of their substance abuse issues and helps us build a foundation to their cures. They are particularly sensitive to all the versions of fake relationships that are out there which might be why I have heard many of them compare face-to-face meetings and online meetings to the difference between sex and pornography, *"it scratches an itch but it never completely satisfies."* It turns out there's science behind their ironic comparison.

Many of us have heard of the expression that we only experience ourselves in the company of others and it turns out this is more true than we may have ever given it credit for. Social connections are vital to our health and well-being but we do not need to "know" someone in order to be able to establish a connection. It is enough to have eye contact. This is largely due to brain cells called mirror neurons which are responsible for building social connections.

We humans have a Mirror Neuron System (MNS) located in the pre-frontal areas of the brain. They were discovered by accident, during a brain scan, when scientists found that the same brain cells lit up whether the monkey opened a nut or just observed a human opening a nut. They realized that action and observation are closely related and that we are soft-wired to experience another person's emotions as if we were experiencing them ourselves. Hence without using words, we are able to interpret the actions of other people and determine the emotions they are feeling. And this is backed by an absurd abundance of science readily available to anyone with a curiosity to learn about what makes us tick.

Stretching this subject ever so slightly into psychology, mirror neurons are shown, and proven, to be closely related to empathy. They provide us with the capacity to understand and react to other people's mental world and therefore play a major role in building social connections and relationships.

When we make eye contact, we "mirror" or "absorb" each other's emotional state and, unlike [oxytocin](#) and other hormones, this internal process works instantaneously, giving us the uncanny ability to navigate complex decisions regarding those around us in real-time. It is the doorway through which we experience emotional stimulation (which is triggered (aroused) by eye contact between us).

Therefore, social contacts are crucial to us all whether we want them or not. And our ability to mirror each other's emotions is important in order to build healthy social connections and to be able to identify and hold onto the special, healing people who help us to become whole. Accordingly, the driver for mirror neurons is an instinctive need for belonging and this is one of the foundation principles that Above and Beyond is built upon. Our special sauce is the "connection" that we build through [limbic resonance](#), eye contact, and spontaneous interaction that can only be achieved by meeting in person.

More than one professional counselor as come to me with their own versions of why they so easily exhaust during and after extended Zoom sessions. What they say is this: It's the [plausible deniability](#) of each other's absence. Our minds have been tricked into the idea of our being together when our bodies know we're not. The dissonance that's created for both parties to this masquerade can be exhausting.

[Johann Hari](#) gives us another way of saying the same thing in his recent book, [Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression - and the Unexpected Solutions](#), *"To end loneliness, you need other people-plus something else. You also need, he explained to me, to feel you are sharing something with the other person, or the group, that is meaningful to both of you. You have to be in it together - and "it" can be anything that you both think has meaning and value."* To us, at Above and Beyond, our shared "it" is the experience of being in group together, eyeball to eyeball, experiencing deep empathy through the free flow of mirror neurons. This rather old-fashioned healing protocol has been with us for thousands of years but now crafted by our psychological artisans to even higher echelons of evidential healing. Our rebellion against its demise reveals our anchoring in what works instead of constant fiddling with what we *think* should work or what technology presents as a convenient alternative, but isn't.

However, during these unique times of social crisis, Coronavirus in point, most of our face-to-face social interaction take been displaced and now occurs online in what I'll call "automated envisionment" or "virtual" meetings. We spend most of our time together staring at pixelated representations of our meeting partners which are displayed on our screens, or listening to each other on our phone's tiny speaker instead of connecting with other people who are either in recovery or sharing oxygen with us on a train or in a supermarket.

Did you ever wonder why it's so hard to have a conversation with someone who avoids your eyes? After all, we do the listening with our ears, so why does it matter? Well, when we're online, we're all looking away from each other. Nobody is looking at anyone else. When we are looking at our counterpart(s) directly on our screen in front of us, our camera is transmitting an indirect stare, which translates to us as looking at "something else" but not the other person. When we try to compensate for this by looking directly into the camera lens while we meet online, then we cannot see the other participants and cannot take "advantage" of the visual cues and clues that supposedly make virtual such a great substitute. So looking into each other's eyes is virtually lost in virtual conversations and the importance of the lack of this cornerstone characteristic of bonding cannot be understated. This is big.

This tiny factoid gets omitted when reading the multi-million dollar marketing copy that the video conferencing industry puts up on their sites to sell us all the prospect that one medium, theirs, is as good as the other, ours (face-to-face). They're not. Video and audio might fool us into thinking that we are really connecting and understanding one another but they're really just poor shadows of the real thing, bent on tricking us by appealing to our greatest fear of physically entering each other's space.

We cannot ignore the added importance of the informal communication that crops up when people are physically in the same place. It's been shown that there are four rules which increase face-to-face efficacy: Back-channel communications like "no kidding" and "wow," equal participation by group members, body positioning (slumped, upright, etc), and the ability to pontificate. Those subtle interactions, like nonverbal gestures that signal someone wants to speak, get lost in virtual meetings (clicking a button that raises a tiny "hand icon" are not the same). Studies have shown how informal, serendipitous communication among workers could increase productivity by 20% in addition to demonstrating that subjects who met in person, versus online, were more likely to be able to tell if the other person would try to cheat. Those who meet virtually get there eventually but it just takes longer and, unfortunately, online meetings are mostly rushed, agenda driven, and blind to recognizing relevant social cues. Audio meetings, the degraded relative of video meetings, are virtually "blind".

I have noticed a tendency with certain of my staff to try to email or text their clients or counterparts with complex subject matter that seems to become even more complicated due to the built-in restrictions of the medium. Texting is great for asking "how are you today" or "what time is dinner?" but it utterly fails with complicated content such as performance reviews or unacceptable statistics are the subject. Yet, for inexplicable reasons which may or may not border on laziness, texting and emailing is used inappropriately all the time, causing unnecessary complications and degrading successful communications (and understanding) when these are the most essential social glues that determine our cohesive health.

The same holds true of virtual meetings. There are times for them, determined by necessity, simplicity of purpose, and goals. And there are times NOT to have them, as determined by complex needs of participants and inability to address individual desired outcomes in a group

setting. Addiction treatment, mental health and counseling therapy all fall into this second category, of meetings that do not lend themselves to virtual mimicking of the real thing.

Virtual meetings are excellent for teacher/student-type meetings where the sharing of content is the predominant goal. But the success rate plummets when it comes to getting participants, patients and peers alike, to open up, disclose hard-to-express feelings, and make themselves vulnerable to video images or disembodied voices that they cannot see. To our populations, those with trust and anxiety issues, virtual meetings can seem like they're facilitated or attended by spooks or ghosts if they're not handled properly. In contrast, these same populations go to great lengths to attend our in-person meetings and cannot complement us enough on how healing they find them.

Some other detriments to the "live simulation" models are the very regular participants who either have never checked their equipment beforehand and spend an inordinate amount of time saying things like, "Is this thing on?" Wi-Fi is still voodoo to a large number of us and unless everyone has taken the time to make sure they know how to use their equipment, it degrades the experience for everyone.

Likewise, 35% to 40% of video calls are conducted with so-called participants who have no video. Can you imagine calling a face-to-face meeting and starting by putting a curtain down between you and everyone else? That's what they're doing if they "just go audio." Another way of translating what this really means is, "I want to participate in this meeting but not have to be seen." Yes, if you're on video, you will be watched. That's the idea. If you're worried someone will see you pick your nose, remember nobody is supposed to pick their nose anymore. If you'd rather just have a phone call so you can "multitask" during the call, it may be time to reevaluate how necessary the meeting, or your presence in the meeting, really is. Video meetings require vigilant and singular attention - almost more focus than if you were in person, and very few of us are willing to do that . . . not at least in the multitude of video meetings that I have been in.

The damage that the "mute" feature of these calls wreaks is rarely written about or addressed, but all of us know the experience of offering some of our smartest, most relevant comments when we unknowingly had the mute button on. Most facilitators begin by putting all attendees on mute, and although we all know it seems like the kind thing to do, by keeping distracting background noise to a minimum, but it's actually counterproductive. In reality the mute feature will actually keep real conversation from happening, even when the facilitator is trying not to be a nuisance and purposefully not emphasizing the use of it. Meetings of under a dozen or so attendees should implement a "nobody gets to mute" rule, but that just never happens. A NO MUTE rule would require everyone to participate, and it would also mean that nobody could be participating in other tasks (like answering email) when they should be giving undivided attention to the meeting.

The social counterpart of the problematic MUTE issue is called "cross talking" and, depending on your group's culture and boundaries, it is either promoted or prohibited (AA strictly

prohibits it). At Above and Beyond, we strongly *encourage* it, without permitting abuse of it or interruptions, because it allows for a free flow of expression and creates sandboxes for interactions that would not otherwise take place. It's where the most authentic expression takes place because interactive expression comes directly from the heart, spontaneously, whereas the prohibition of it creates social suffocation, in our opinion, and stifles connection.

However, with virtual meetings, which includes telephonic, there are not only technical barriers to spontaneous expression, there is a strongly endorsed MUTE feature which is constantly referred to throughout most meetings. The inherent build-in and overemphasis of this feature puts another checkmark in the unuseful column of virtual meetings.

Along the same lines are how we dress and present ourselves to each other, which seems to bring out more consideration for one another when we meet live than when we meet virtually. Too often, video meeting participants assume that a virtual meeting means participating from wherever they want and dressed however they want to look. We find the consideration of physical appearance to be a plus for live meetings even though our populations do not have extensive wardrobes. Our experiential opinion is that the participants present themselves with more respect for one another, and the collective group as a whole, when they are together live and in person.

There seems to be a distinct disinterest in testing our cameras, our camera angles, our backgrounds, and our privacy to see how we will look to others during the meeting! It sounds simple, but the natural angle of a laptop camera means that the camera is looking straight up your nose or along your chin (it usually adds an unwanted chin on me). Natural computer lighting can make many of us look washed out and overly blanched. Sometimes, we'll have participants who are in front of a sunshine-filled window and while the golden halo around their head might look nice in a Renaissance art piece, it's annoying to the rest of us in the meeting.

As I think of all the social norms that we respect when we see each other live versus those that are abandoned or neglected when we video meet, the list seems to grow and grow. Just off the top of my head from my own personal history of annoying observations are: deep V-neck t-shirts and strapless tops make people look topless on a screen; headphones or microphones that delay response or don't work; Venetian blinds behind the participant (the light moving in and out of them wreaks havoc on the other's display); dark heads or bad lighting that makes it impossible to see the person that you are talking with; poor bandwidth that makes every movement seem herky-jerky; emails and other notices that might go off during the meeting.

Another point not often mentioned regarding our populations regards their inability to speak freely in their homes and living situations. Because of the lack of privacy in the uncertain living conditions that they are forced to live in, most involving open rooms and roommates, they are unable to bring up many of the demons that would be outed in a private group or counseling

session. This makes them even more of an unspeaking placard during a video meeting which renders no good thing.

Unfortunately, the six feet we've kept from each other since the start of this crisis, has given our inner demons and those of our patients, room to breathe. The social distancing measures necessary to keep the COVID-19 at bay are directly threatening the sobriety of the people in our care by separating them from their traditional social support structures and leaving them feeling alone, isolated, and anxious . . . *exactly the stimulus that originally caused them abuse their substances of choice!*

Live meetings bring everyone together into a common, dedicated space where it cannot be interrupted by children, spouses, barking dogs or other distractions. Video meetings should offer the same respect for the meeting space, although they rarely do.

As one patient, Bonnie, recently told me, *"In the outside world, if we're down, we're made to feel that we're screwed up and it's only you. Because you didn't succeed. You didn't get a job where you earn a lot of money. It's your fault. You're a bad mother. And then suddenly, when we came here, a lot of us realized 'Hey, I'm the same'. I thought I was the only one. It was what a lot of other people here told me too, 'I was feeling so lost and depressed but now I feel I can stand on my own. I feel I can make it. I am a fighter. I feel good.' You come out of your corner crying and you start to fight for yourself. Being here changes you. I don't know what I would do without this place."*

Her comment is not uncommon. It represents a common version of what the majority of graduates have to say about their success in reconnecting with themselves, first, and then with others. And these kinds of breakthroughs just don't seem to happen virtually.

My intention in composing this short piece is not to discourage anyone from starting up or participating in a video or audio meeting when there is no other alternative. We need to make use of everything at our disposal so that we can meet our needs and the needs of our constituents and peers as adequately as we are capable of. So in this regard, using virtual means in times of need, I am very much in support of.

It's the aftermath of all of this that concerns me. We are all in the process of developing a "new normal" and when we overcome this brief period of distraction and return to whatever we remember as working the best for us, I want us to be decided on "in-person" meetings as being the best. For all the reasons listed above, I am insistent on keeping our doors open, with virtual meetings being used whenever necessary but viewed as less than optimal.

It is very easy to become lazy, during all of this rehabilitualization, and to call a meeting with an email and the click of an icon. Too easy.

But lazy initiatives will only bring about lazy results and that's not what we stand for at Above and Beyond.