

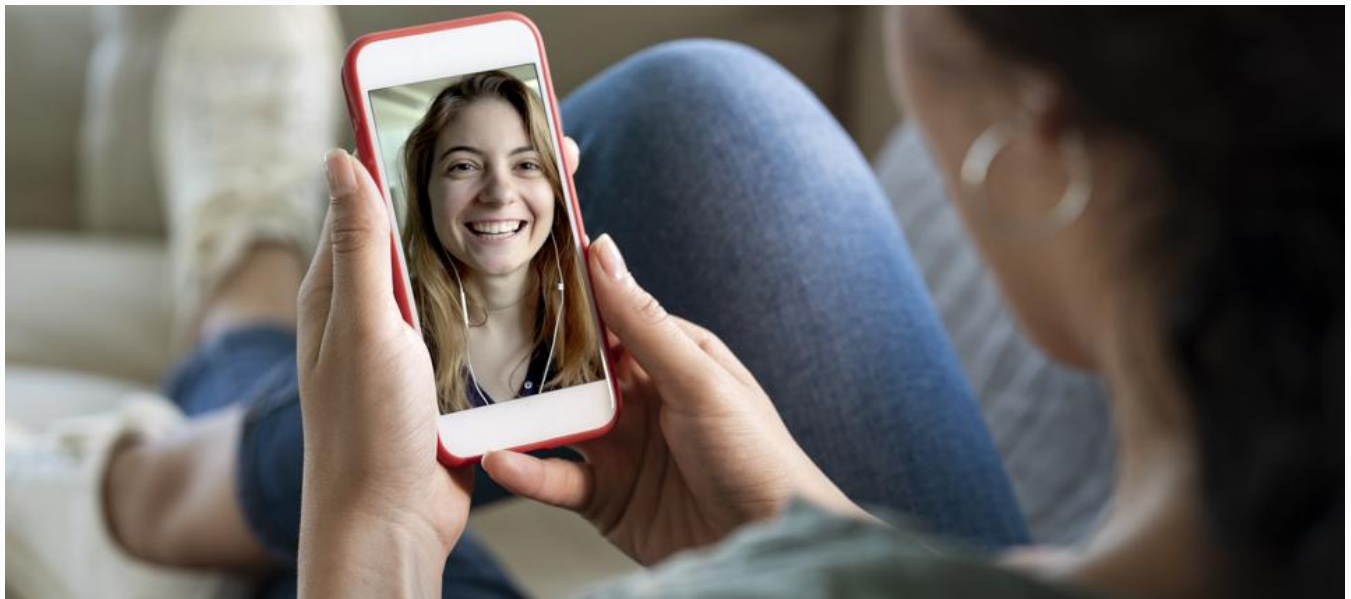
Research Shows That Virtual Eye Contact Has The Same Psychological Impact As It Does In Person



Alison Escalante Contributor 

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As the weeks of social distancing drag on, most of us have begun to crave human contact. It's the most natural thing in the world, and staying away from each other means that we are fighting every instinct we have.

Our entire nervous system is wired to come together during times of stress. This is true even if we are introverts, ambiverts or extroverts albeit at different thresholds. That's because the most effective way to regulate stress in our

nervous system is through social interaction.

What are we supposed to do about this during the COVID-19 pandemic? If we do come together we risk infecting each other with a deadly pathogen. But to stay away we are fighting our own bodies.

Why is that exactly? It has to do with the autonomic nervous system which has three main settings. Most of us spend the majority of our time in two of them (the third comes into play during traumatic events). How we feel at a given time has a lot to do with whether our sympathetic nerve or our vagus nerve is more active. The first makes us feel anxious and preps us for fight or flight, and then second makes us feel calm and connected, turning on our social nervous system. By far, the most efficient way to turn down the sympathetic nerve is through meaningful [social interaction](#).

That's why a flurry of new research is looking at how we can meet our social needs without direct contact. In one recent study, a sizable group of [solo activities](#) were found to help people feel socially fulfilled. But are there ways we can actually shift the autonomic nervous system when we are alone?

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Virtual eye contact is as helpful as eye contact in person.

A [new study](#) has found that virtual eye contact has the same impact on our nervous system that in person eye contact does. The paper comes from Tampere University in Finland, where researchers wanted to know whether we had to be physically with each other to get the benefit of interaction.

To sort out how we react to seeing someone virtually, the researchers used measurements of skin conductance which tracks activation of the autonomic nervous system. They also measured facial muscles to see how the participants' felt about the interaction. Study participants looked at another person's direct and averted gaze in three situations: in-person interaction, a video call and just watching a video.

People's facial muscles showed they felt positive in all three situations, but the autonomic nervous system was not stimulated by simply watching a video. As expected, in person eye contact turned up the vagus nerve. But the great news was that video calls did too.

Jonne Hietanen, first author of the study, explained in a [press release](#), "Our results imply that the autonomic arousal response to eye contact requires the perception of being seen by another. Another person's physical presence is not required for this effect." The study authors were quick to point out that this may not work well in applications like Skype or Zoom where the position of the camera creates an averted gaze.

Virtual eye contact can help us feel connected during social distancing, and that's great news. We all need to feel seen by each other.

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