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## A perfect storm for negative *body image*

**The reliance on social media and video conferencing in the time of COVID is taking a toll on mental health.**

**B**y now, everyone knows at least one person who has been diagnosed as COVID-19 positive, and, sadly, many of us have lost family or friends to the virus.

The pandemic has had an impact on virtually every facet of our lives. The various levels of the national lockdown have affected schooling, curfew times, access to gyms, and the way we work. It's not difficult to see how these have resulted in a disruption to daily routines, exercise activity, sleep patterns, and eating behaviors. Combine this with social isolation, and we may very well have the perfect recipe for poor mental wellbeing and negative body image.

Body image describes the way we see ourselves in the mirror and the way we picture ourselves in our minds. This also encompasses what we believe about our own appearance, how we sense and control our body, and how we feel about our height, weight, and body shape.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE VIDEO CONFERENCING**

Social media may certainly be an attractive means of maintaining personal relationships in times of social isolation. But Italian surveys suggest that excessive and prolonged exposure to social media during the pandemic has resulted in further anxiety, creating a vicious cycle. In young Spanish women, a significant relationship was observed between the frequency of Instagram use and body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

With offices being emptied in favor of work-from-home scenarios, the rise of online conferencing, with meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, has resulted in the "Zoom boom". But laptop and cellphone cameras with wide-angle lenses produce a fishbowl view, which distorts the face. The nose

may appear 30% larger in photos and video taken from 30cm away, as opposed to 2m. It's not unheard of for Zoom participants to be spending less time engaging with their colleagues and more time staring at their own image with dissatisfaction.

### **WHAT TO DO?**

First, take solace in the fact that we're all in this together. While loneliness, anxiety, and stress may be that much more evident in the setting of social isolation, know that there are many others experiencing the same thing.

Take time out to critically assess your daily activities, eating habits, exercise schedules, and sleep patterns. Making specific and informed changes may tip you back into healthier and more sustainable routines.

For those who are frequently engaged in online video conferencing, it may be worthwhile to create a dedicated meeting space in your home where your camera may be placed a more reasonable distance away, to avoid image distortions.

If you suspect you are experiencing excessive anxiety, depression, or stress during the pandemic, arrange a consultation with your GP, as clinical intervention may be necessary.

Regarding concerns of facial and body appearance, it's advisable to consult an aesthetic doctor. The professional insight will be invaluable in identifying whether your perceived flaw is a preoccupation with a distortion of reality. In addition, aesthetic doctors can advise you on the most appropriate medical therapies to address your concerns, where they are clinically indicated.

There is mounting evidence of a link between appearance, mental health, and overall wellbeing. These are challenging and unpredictable times, but help is at hand, so be sure to seek it.