

# Hearing-Friendly Video Conferences

By Carolyn Ginsburg Stern, MBA

Conducting work and social interactions through video conferencing is especially difficult for people with hearing loss who typically prefer or are better able to communicate close up and in person. Try these tips to make video conferences more hearing-friendly and improve the experience for everyone, not just for the person with hearing loss.

## SET UP AND COMMUNICATION STYLE

- Secure a strong internet connection and a reliable visual set up to enhance non-verbal communication.** Turn on your camera and sit in a well-lit space to brighten your face and avoid backlighting, such as light shining through a window behind a workstation. Sit reasonably close to the webcam with the top of the head to your elbows seen on camera.
- Foster high-quality audio and eliminate background noise.** Use a high-quality microphone, headset/microphone combo, or earbuds. When you're not speaking, put your microphone on mute to reduce background noise.
- Practice respectful communication etiquette.** Speak in turn and state your name before speaking. Project your voice succinctly and articulately, and avoid fillers such as "so" and "um." People with hearing loss have a hard time keeping up with spontaneous discussions and details, so try not to sway from the agenda and type your questions or clarifications in the chat feature of the video conferencing tool you are using.
- Suggest these communication facilitation tips to the meeting host:** Publish and stick to an agenda, request that questions, links, contact information, and other logistics be typed in the chat box that is visible to all participants, inform participants when the topic has changed, and give the person with hearing loss time to process the information and formulate a response.

## CAPTIONING A VIDEO CONFERENCE

Real-time captioning of video conferences and chats can greatly improve participants' ability to follow, comprehend, and contribute to the discussion. Zoom, a popular video conferencing platform, does not have an automatic live captioning feature like other similar platforms such as Google Meet,



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Photo Credit/Freepik

Microsoft Teams, and Skype. Until it is made available, here's how to caption your Zoom sessions.

- Hire a Remote Live Captioner.** Set up a remote captioner with an invitation to join a Zoom meeting and privileges to type closed captions (activated by the meeting's host). The captions are displayed when a user activates the "cc" button on the tool bar. Through a dedicated link (StreamText or 1CapApp feed), the captioner can also stream the text to a separate web browser. This option is often preferred because it allows for viewing and scrolling through a larger block of text and saving the transcript.
- Use a Web-Based Speech Recognition Tool.** Consider using *Web Captioner* and *Otter*, two web-based services that can be used in conjunction with Zoom. Here's how it works: Open the Zoom meeting invite and in a separate browser open the captioning tool. Re-size the two browsers and place the captioning window beneath the Zoom window. Turn on your computer speakers and the captioning tool. Alternatively, view the web-based captioning browser on a separate display and place close to the speakers. Check settings in *Web Captioner* to change font and color. For *Otter*, adjust the font size by pressing the Ctrl and + or - keys at the same time.
- Use an Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) App on Your Smartphone.** Activate an ASR app such as *Otter*, *Ava*, or *Live Transcribe* (Android only) and position the mobile device next to the speakers of the device you are using for the Zoom call. For example, watch Zoom on your desktop computer and place the smartphone with the captioning app activated next to the attached speakers. If you're using an iPhone, turn off auto-lock in the phone's settings to keep the screen open and turn on auto-lock when done.
- Better Viewing in Zoom.** A feature in Zoom called "pinning" will make the person speaking appear enlarged on the center of your screen. This will allow for better visual cues and speech reading. To "pin," click on the three dots on the upper right hand corner and select the pinning option.