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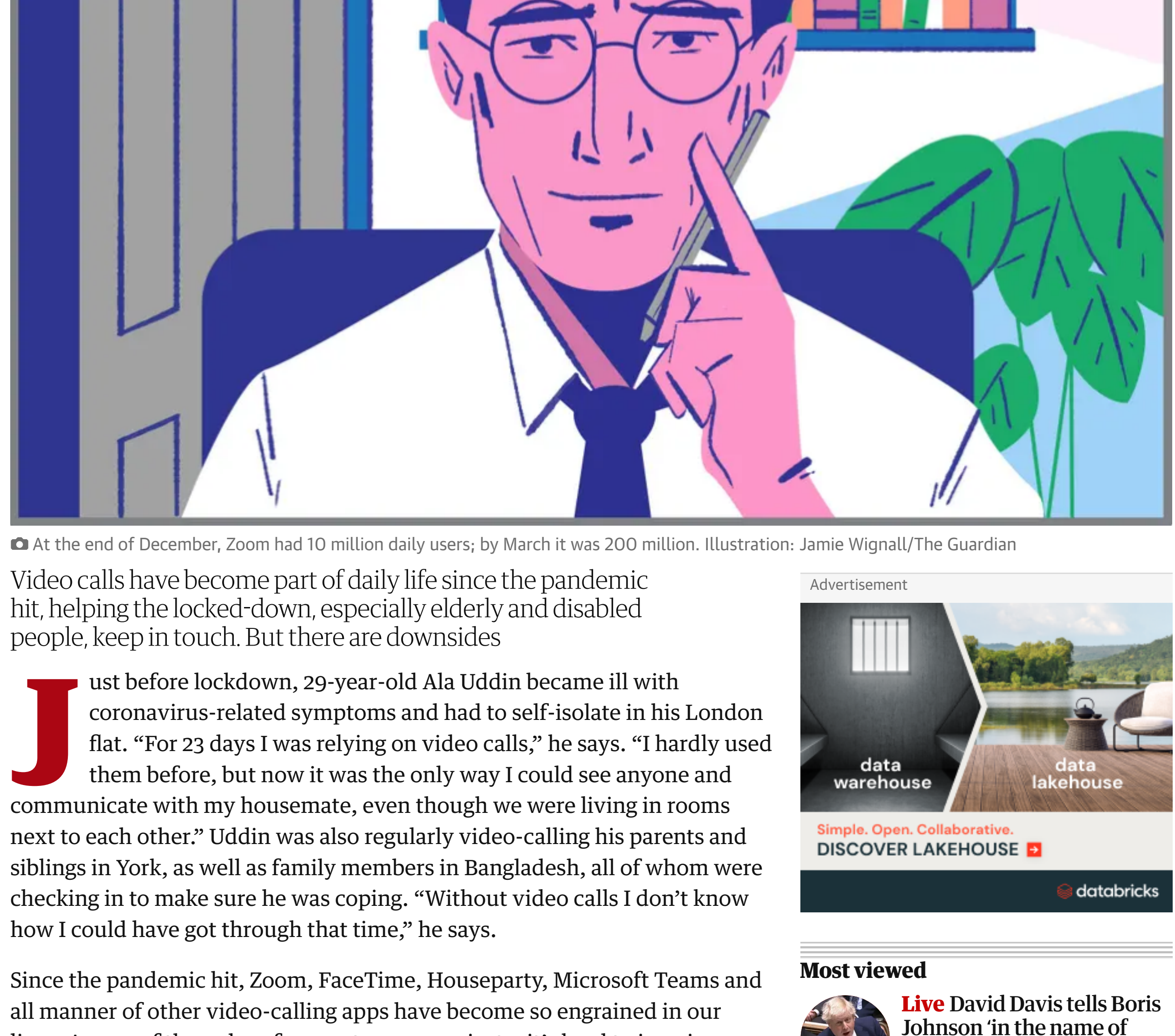
Lockdown living Zoom

The Zoom boom: how video-calling became a blessing - and a curse

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At the end of December, Zoom had 10 million daily users; by March it was 200 million. Illustration: Jamie Wignall/The Guardian

Video calls have become part of daily life since the pandemic hit, helping the locked-down, especially elderly and disabled people, keep in touch. But there are downsides

Just before lockdown, 29-year-old Ala Uddin became ill with coronavirus-related symptoms and had to self-isolate in his London flat. "For 23 days I was relying on video calls," he says. "I hardly lived before, but now it was the only way I could see anyone and communicate with my housemate, even though we were living in rooms next to each other." Uddin was also regularly video-calling his parents and siblings in York, as well as family members in Bangladesh, all of whom were checking in to make sure he was coping. "Without video calls I don't know how I could have got through that time," he says.

Since the pandemic hit, Zoom, FaceTime, Houseparty, Microsoft Teams and all manner of other video-calling apps have become so engrained in our lives. As one of the only safe ways to communicate, it's hard to imagine living without them. None of these have taken off quite like Zoom. At the end of December, the app reported a maximum of 10 million daily users. By March, 200 million people were on it each day to work, socialise, view lessons and lectures, sing in choirs, attend church, birthday parties and weddings, meet new babies, say final words to dying family members and observe Ramadan and Easter. So embedded are these apps in all parts of life now that when Zoom went down last weekend, it made headlines around the world and even halted the Downing Street press conference.

For many of us, Zoom, and apps like it, are a necessary frustration - the technical glitches, the pixelated faces, the exhaustingly long meetings with colleagues with their bookcases in the background - are the price we pay for preventing the spread of a pandemic. But for others, many of them elderly or disabled, the Zoom boom has helped them become more sociable than before.



Illustration: Jamie Wignall/The Guardian

Julie Taylor, 61, who is retired and lives in Wiltshire, had never used video-calling before the lockdown began, but now talks to her friends every day via Zoom. "My neighbour Ben, who is 15, told me about it and helped me set it all up by calling instructions over the fence. It's made me realise what I was missing out on before," she says. "I live on my own and so calling my friends each day or calling into the weekly public meetings has been doing a lot of good for me when I feel down in the dumps." Similarly, Uddin's grandmother in York has been lent a tablet with video-calling software. "It was so emotional seeing her once she got it working," he says. "Since she hasn't been able to go out at all, I could see how comforted she was just by having my face there and knowing that we're all safe."

When Emma Critchley-Lloyd, 31, a marketer living in London, started a Saturday night Zoom quiz with her family, she didn't realise it would bring them into contact more regularly than before. "A lot of my relatives aren't very good with technology and I've never even needed to have their email addresses before," she says. "We're now seeing each other more than we would before lockdown and I hope we can keep it going afterwards ... It's been something to look forward to each week, even though it can be an effort to get on a video call after a day of work Zooms."

The psychologist Dr Doreen Dodgen-Magee sees video-calling as being an essential but contentious part of our lives. "As social animals, we fail to thrive when we can't have meaningful connections with others, so video-calling is really important at the moment for helping us feel part of a community," she says. But it is not without its flaws. "Speaking over video is such a static way of connecting with people. We're used to a full sensory experience, which is lost when we're limited to a small square of someone's face with audio delays. Plus, we're always seeing our own faces, so there's a constant sense of internal judgment on how we look and the distraction of where we should even be looking."

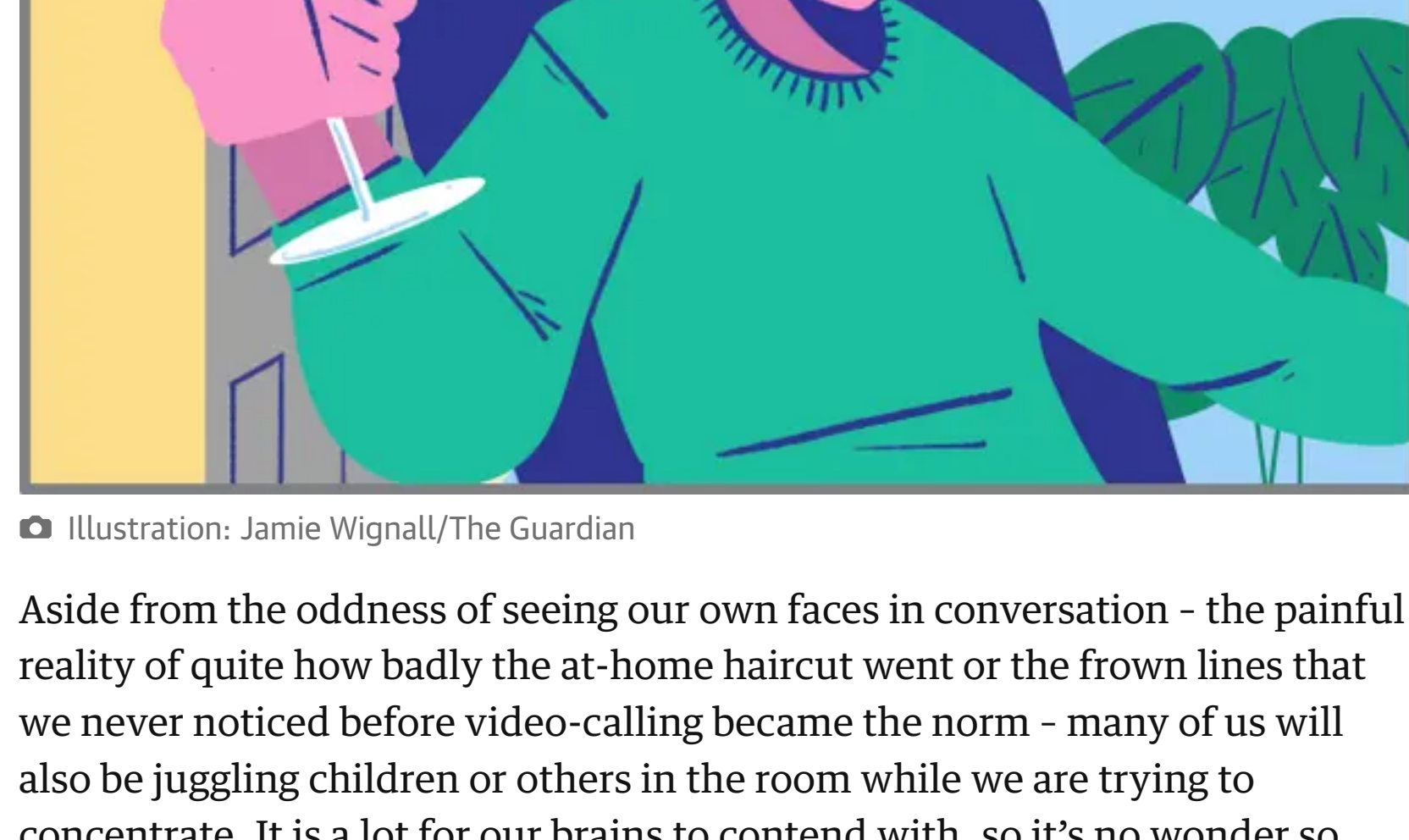


Illustration: Jamie Wignall/The Guardian

Aside from the oddness of seeing our own faces in conversation - the painful reality of quite how badly the at-home haircut went or the frown lines that we never noticed before video-calling became the norm - many of us will also be juggling children or others in the room while we are trying to concentrate. It is a lot for our brains to contend with, so it's no wonder so many of us are experiencing Zoom fatigue.

Tom, who is based in New York and works for a media company, has found himself on marathon seven- or eight-hour Zoom calls since lockdown began in the city. "My boss just has the video feed on all day and will fire instructions at us while he works so he doesn't have to call or email," he says. "It's so inefficient because we end up not being able to do all of the other work we need to and these calls are so much more tiring than normal conversation. By the end of the day my brain feels like it's been pulverised and the smallest task becomes a huge effort."

In the absence of benign office chat about us in work and what we had for dinner last night, which helps to de-stress us in work environments, all our work interactions are now "hyper-focused", says Pam Custers, a psychotherapist at the Counselling Directory. "For that reason, breaks are more important than ever, since we're doing all our work and socialising in one place." One of the reasons that work Zoom calls can feel so draining is the pressure to fill any gaps in conversation. "Silence feels very unnatural on a video call," she says. "But we need to allow that thinking time, as well as having the host be mindful of when to draw things to a close, rather than letting them peter out ... At the moment there is a notion that you're available all the time because people aren't going anywhere." The 40-minute limit on free Zoom accounts could be the ideal amount of time to use, she suggests.



Illustration: Jamie Wignall/The Guardian

For the cyberpsychology researcher Dr Linda Kaye, the video-calling boom may be the closest we have got to seeing the early utopian ideals of the internet come to fruition. "The idea of Web 2.0 was for people to be active agents on the internet and this is somewhat being fulfilled now by using it for such connectivity, regardless of location. It seems like this technology is fostering a sense of unity, rather than exacerbating divisions as it may have been doing in recent years." This is particularly true in the case of those who were already housebound before the lockdown began; as music and theatre performances have moved online and video-calling has become the norm, it has in turn normalised their day-to-day interactions.

Arif Miah, who has been launching a creative advertising agency during lockdown with Uddin, sees video-calling as a saving grace. "Ramadan has been so weird this year," he says. "Usually the streets are full and there's celebrations, but right now it's like Christmas without the tree and presents - there's no joy. Technology has been such a blessing - I don't know how we would have kept each other motivated otherwise."

Since Uddin is observing Ramadan alone in his flat, the pair break their fast each evening over a video call and have been sharing their meals with family over social media, too. "It's been so hectic starting the business and fasting in lockdown," Uddin says. "We're having to sleep late in the mornings and then work into the night, so even though the video calls have been tiring, they are essential, especially with older members of the family who haven't been able to see anyone since the lockdown started."

But what if you can't afford a computer or the right phone or tablet to stay in touch? "There is a digital divide where some people will not have access to adequate internet speeds or the relevant technology and so they will be missing out," says Kaye.



Illustration: Jamie Wignall/The Guardian

James is a teacher in a London secondary school. "Many of our students come from deprived backgrounds, so asking them to have all of this technology available [to attend online lessons] is just not feasible," he says. "It has put us in a real bind because we don't have the funds to help them get access to video-calling and so we're relying on them for independent study when they also now have extra caring duties with looking after younger siblings at home."

Social inequalities are stark on screen when faced with a direct link into people's homes. Background graphics on Zoom might create a temporary solution and online parody accounts such as Room Rater have sprung up to poke fun at TV guests' home settings. The diversity and inclusion consultant Sara Chandran has heard of one company going so far as to instigate a "virtual house tour" as a supposedly fun way to keep their employees engaged. "Those in decision-making positions are often coming from a place of privilege," she says. "People are deeply concerned about their futures and so doing a tour to show off your house probably isn't going to help when many employees will be self-conscious about the state of their living spaces, especially if they are renting in house shares and fighting to find an area to quietly work in. That's likely something they won't want to share with their bosses."

There is also the issue of how Zoom and other apps prioritise speakers. "The person who speaks loudest can often command the most space on video calls because they can just ignore the others, so it makes it much harder for people who are anxious to participate," says Chandran. This could particularly affect employees who are lower down in the pay scale and already wary of putting a foot wrong, as well as ethnic minorities who may have concerns about speaking up in a largely white space.

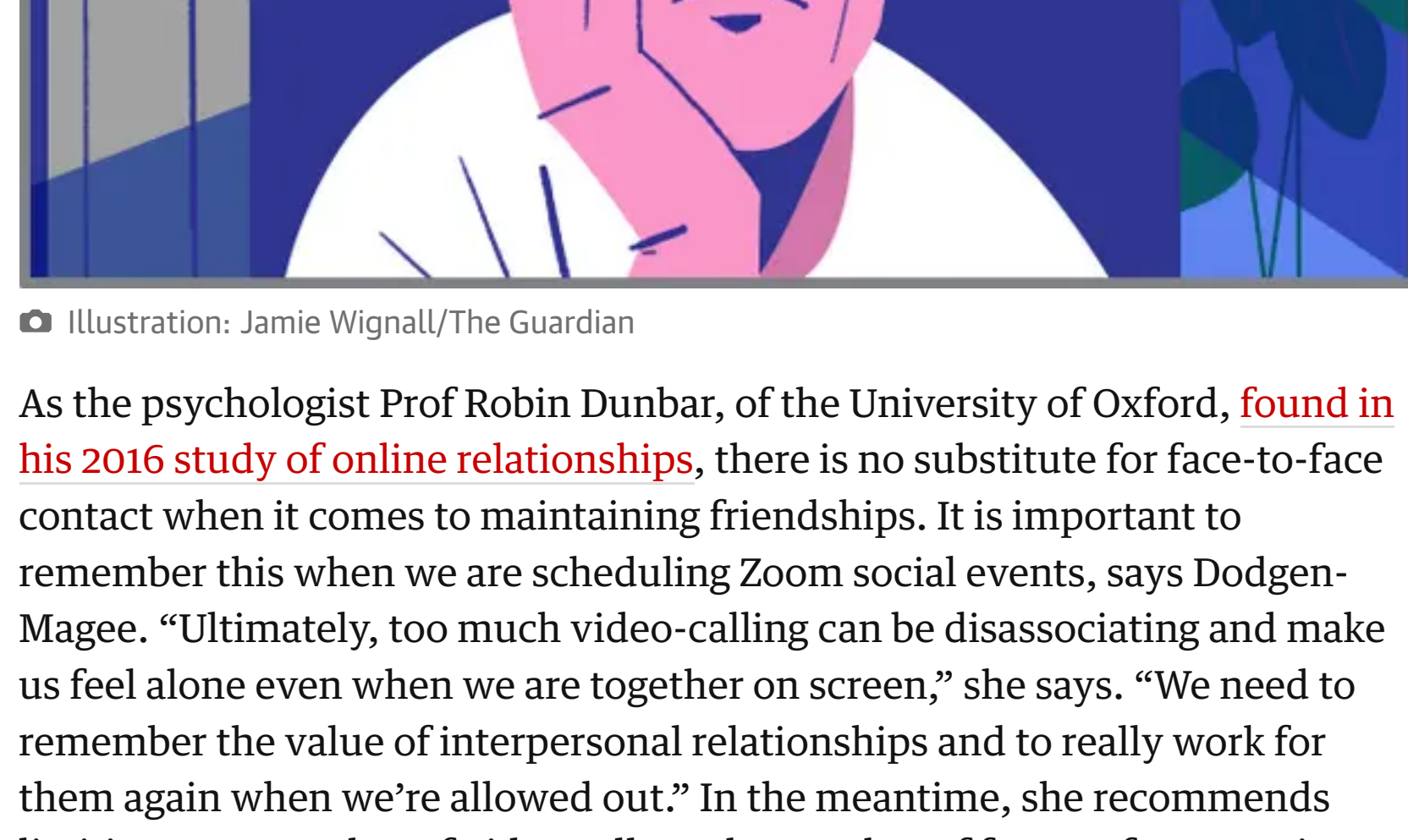


Illustration: Jamie Wignall/The Guardian

As the psychologist Prof Robin Dunbar, of the University of Oxford, found in his 2016 study of online relationships, there is no substitute for face-to-face contact when it comes to maintaining friendships. It is important to remember this when we are scheduling Zoom social events, says Dodgen-Magee. "Ultimately, too much video-calling can be dissociating and make us feel alone even when we are together on screen," she says. "We need to remember the value of interpersonal relationships and to really work for them again when we're allowed out." In the meantime, she recommends limiting your number of video calls to the number of face-to-face meetings you would have each day, as well as developing visual cues to signal when people might want to speak on group calls.

Chandran finds there are some positives we can take away, though. "This lockdown has broken down a lot of barriers for many people who are disabled or who might have caring responsibilities in fast-tracking working from home and making workplaces accessible - which were all things companies used to say would be way off in the future," she says. "So, we need to continue with these developments when lockdown ends and everyone should try and keep up the empathy and understanding they have hopefully learned by going through such a traumatic experience together." She hopes that, in the future, working from home will become the norm for those who require it, while companies will take the time to find out what their employees require in order to perform at their best, whether that means flexible working or more face-to-face meetings.

"We do have to remember we are all in this together," Uddin says. "Video-calling is a great way to stay safe, but I'm just looking forward to seeing people again. There really is no substitute for just sitting in each other's presence, even if you're not saying anything."

Some names have been changed

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