

Put Zoom In Your Social Life

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After a few weeks of sheltering, I received an invitation to join a Zoom session. I had no idea what I was being invited to do. Like all older baby boomers, I grew up with three television channels, in black and white and a telephone, anchored to a kitchen wall. After some research, I discovered that Zoom is an accessible-friendly, meeting app, a way to stay in touch with groups of people. It was just what I needed to chase away that gnawing feeling of being alone in a coronavirus world.

Zoom can be used for business meetings, socializing, or personal gatherings online. It offers wireless video and audio, and works on Windows, Mac, IOS as well as Android and Blackberry platforms. There are free and paid options, a list of pricing is available on the Zoom.com website.

Zoom has a built-in, closed captioning feature. However, someone must type the speaker's words. One can integrate closed captioning services such as CART with Zoom. I have not used Zoom with closed captioning. My made-for-iPhone hearing aids connect directly to my cell and pad. I hear conversation on Zoom clearly. Some hearing aid and cochlear implant manufacturers have a bridge unit, which fosters the direct connection of aids and implants to android phones and computers. Check with your audiologist or on the website of your manufacturer to see if such a connector is available for your hearing device make and model.

A host initiates a Zoom session when reserving a meeting date and time. Invitation links are sent to attendees. As an attendee, you have the choice of connecting to the meeting through the provided link or phone number. If you want to participate in a meeting through the link, you must first download the Zoom app.

On the meeting date and time, participants sign in and wait in a virtual waiting room for the host to let them in. Once attendees are accounted for, the host can virtually close the meeting door, thus preventing hackers. With a paid subscription, there is an option to record meetings for later viewing.

My first experience with Zoom was virtually attending my Women's Discussion Group meeting.

Before the virus broke, our twenty members met in person on the second Wednesday of each month. Twelve brave souls signed up for our first Zoom meeting in mid-April. At the designated time, I clicked the invitation link, sent to me via email by the woman who heads our group. I was placed in the Zoom waiting room, and then, three minutes later, I was let into the meeting. For the first time in weeks, I saw the faces of some of the other women members. I wanted to send them a virtual hug.

All Zoom sessions have basic options, such as volume and mute controls. Other controls are included with the paid service. You can hold a meeting for up to 40 minutes with a maximum of 50 attendees using the free option. With a subscription, you can set the length of time to meet and the number of attendees. The host should set ground rules at the beginning of the meeting, regarding who speaks when and how to ask questions. Prior to the start of the meeting, all should mute their microphones to prevent the leakage of environmental sounds. When mics are muted, participants will only see whomever is speaking, thus giving those who have trouble hearing an opportunity to speech read.

I used my cell phone to connect to my women's group meeting and chose the option to see others in the session. The small screen on my iPhone only allowed a view of five other women. The larger screen on a computer or iPad might be better for group meetings.

After a positive experience, I decided to participate in other Zoom sessions. Now, I attend a Zoomed Tai Chi session. As a member of the board of directors of a local charitable healthcare clinic, I use Zoom to participate in the clinic's meetings without hearing issues.

I serve on several homeowner association committees within my community and have used the GoToMeeting app for neighborhood meetings. Though GoToMeeting works much like Zoom, I found the sound quality better on Zoom. I've lost my internet connection during GoToMeeting sessions. That has never occurred with Zoom.

As we meander through this strange hearing world, know that there are creative and innovative ways to keep in touch with business associates, volunteer organizations, family, and those in your social circles. Though I do not mind solitude, I see the benefit in keeping a social life, albeit, one conducted online.