

Tips for How to Use Electronics for Social Interaction

In a world of social distancing, video conferences take the place of formal meetings, but very little of life takes place in formal meetings and we need to work to replace casual, informal face to face social interaction with electronic equivalents.

You don't have to use formal meetings tools, such as Zoom, to get together with one or more people electronically. If it's just one other person, a phone call is a pretty good starting point but we've got to get use to calling more people more often, with less of a reason, than we did before. If you're being held back from calling a person because you don't know them well, now is the time for dropping that inhibition.

What if you want to go further and either talk to more people or share visual materials with another person?

If you have any kind of electronic device that communicates, be it a phone, a tablet, or desktop computer, chances are that it already has software installed on it for electronic meetings. If you've got a Gmail account then it's likely that Google's tools are already on your phone or can be accessed in a web browser. Currently, there are two free ones: Hangouts and Duo. Hangouts is the older of the two and, at one point, Google announced that it would be discontinued but they continue to push the date further out. Hangouts runs in an app on a phone or tablet or in a browser window on a desktop and can handle video calls with up to 25 people. Hangouts also lets you share a view of your entire screen or just one application; this is useful if you want to show somebody a document your working on or, even, just watch a video together.

Google Duo is Google's latest offering and it's best described as making video phone calls. The problem with video phone calls has been that they use a lot of data so if your plan has limited data, an hour call can burn up your quota for a month. Duo goes to great lengths to minimize the bandwidth (although it's probably still uses a lot) so you can still consider things like going for a walk and showing someone else where you're going.

You used to be able to say "we Skyped about that" and have everyone know what you mean. This is not as common since Microsoft purchased Skype, but Skype is alive, well, and still free if you're connecting to another instance of Skype. Skype is only installed automatically on Windows 10 PCs, but you can install it on just about anything else. Skype for iPhone and Android is available through the app stores; www.skype.com is the source for desktop installs. Of course, it runs on Linux, Macs, Xboxes, etc. (if you need to call a landline or cell phone in a foreign country or call the U.S. from a foreign country, Skype is very inexpensive.)

Of course, if you conferencing with a lot of people a lot, then it pays to have an account with one of the high capacity conferencing services such as Zoom or Webex. In fact, there are so many services and so many reviews that it's hard to choose. My favorite review is this one: <https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-video-conferencing-software> You don't have to pick just one to get started. Both Zoom and Webex offer a free tier that will still handle pretty large conferences.

If you're not used to using conferencing tools, it will take an effort on your part to get started with using them for social interaction. You might want to consider doing some of the following things to get started:

- > Eat a meal with someone who is connected via a video link.
- > Go for a walk with someone connected via video link. (Probably best to try if you have an unlimited data plan.)
- > Meet a person or a pet who lives with a person you're conferencing with.
- > Watch a video with someone who is somewhere else. Yes, you could each watch the video on your own, but then you wouldn't hear the other person's reaction.