



# Videoconferencing with Older Adults:

*Best Practices for Psychosocial Group Interventions*

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# FOREWORD

This document presents an overview of the recommended practices for videoconferencing with older adults in the framework of psychosocial group interventions.

In Part 1, the authors draw on examples from both the literature and their own observations working in practice settings. This part has three sections: 1. Technology use, 2. Considerations when leading activities online, and 3. Technical considerations. The articles were identified through a systematic search of various databases (CINAHL, APA PsychInfo and Google Scholar) and the grey literature, using the keywords “group intervention,” “videoconference,” “elderly” and synonyms.

Part 2 involves the experience leading the *Count Me In!*\* program reported by a group of students in the occupational therapy master’s program at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. The challenges encountered and solutions proposed in this section touch on the themes presented in Part 1.

It is our hope that the information developed based on the scientific literature and the *Count Me In!* program will serve to guide videoconferencing practices with older adults during psychosocial group interventions.

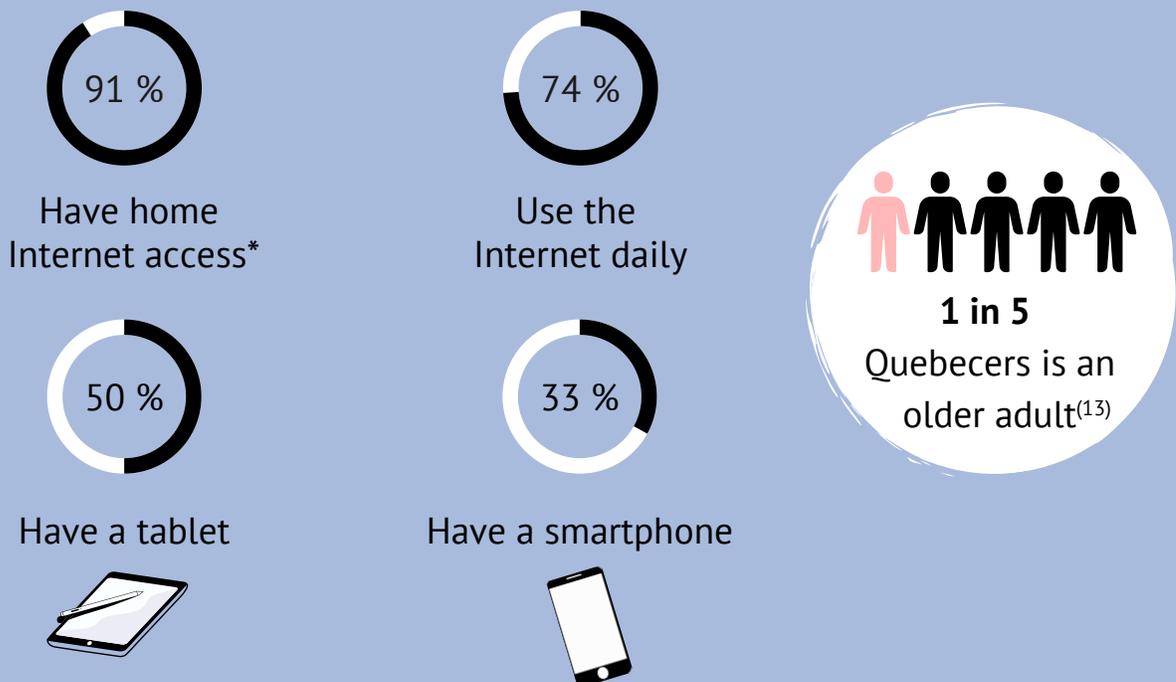
\*Parisien, M., Nour, K., Belley, A. M., Billette, V., Aubin, G. & Regenstreif, A. (2018). *Count Me In! Promoting Seniors’ Mental Health and Community Participation*. University Affiliated Centre (CAU) in Social Gerontology, CIUSSS West-Central Montreal and the VIES (Vieillissements, exclusions sociales et solidarités) research team. <https://www.creges.ca/en/programs-guides-and-tools/>

# PART 1: DATA SYNTHESIS

## 1. Technology use

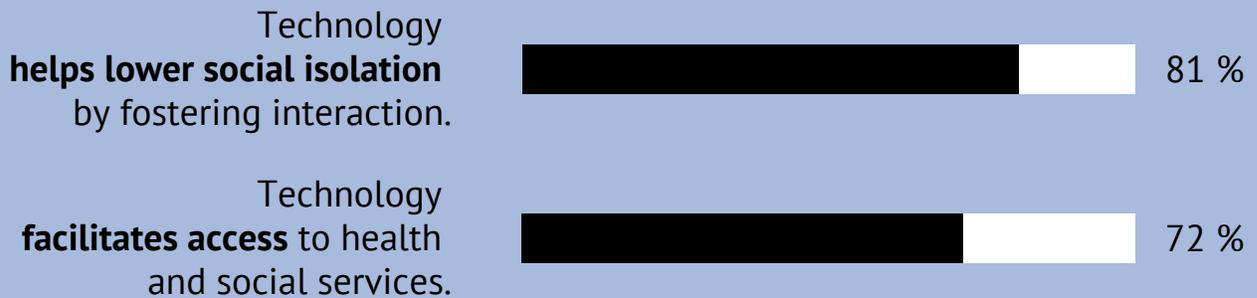
This section presents the statistics on technology use by older adults in Quebec (1.1), its benefits (1.2), factors shaping the individual experience (1.3) and the pros and cons of online meetings (1.4).

### 1.1 Data on older adults <sup>(1)</sup>



\*A 2018 CEFRIO study<sup>(5)</sup> suggests that, while the majority of those aged 65 and over use the Internet, less than 25% of older adults have a high degree of digital literacy.

## OLDER ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGY<sup>(1)</sup>



### 1.2 Effects of technology on loneliness<sup>(9)</sup>

In 2020, a study on COVID-19 showed that technologies like videoconferencing could help reduce isolation.

- However, while technology can lessen feelings of loneliness, it shouldn't be seen as a panacea. Furthermore, it is only beneficial to those who know how to use it.

### 1.3 Influence of experience with technology<sup>(2,15,19)</sup>

The adoption of technology by older adults as a means of intervention depends largely on their willingness to use it. Familiarity and previous experience can also impact confidence and dismantle misconceptions.

- However, some aspects of ageing – a decline in spatial processing abilities, visual attention and/or motor control along with sight and hearing impairments – can adversely affect the ability to use technology.\*

#### FACILITATORS

- Previous experience using technology
- Positive perception of technology
- Adequate technical support
- Strong self-efficacy

#### BARRIERS

- Lack of skills/experience
- Negative perception of technology
- Health issues
- Technical difficulties
- Low self-efficacy

\* Common difficulties include being able to use the screen, keyboard and/or mouse, hearing loss, reduced image processing skills and difficulties remembering how the technology works. Certain features can help mitigate or overcome these difficulties.<sup>(9)</sup>

# 1.4 Advantages and disadvantages of videoconferencing

<p><b>Ease of access</b> <sup>(4,10)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No need to travel</li> <li>• Adjustable settings (volume, brightness, screen magnifier, etc.)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Usage difficulties</b> <sup>(4,10)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motor control, physical strength needed to use tool, etc.</li> <li>• Learning curve, having to memorize features, etc.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reduced anxiety</b> <sup>(4)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less social pressure</li> <li>• Familiar surroundings fostering openness</li> </ul>	<p><b>Fears/misconceptions about videoconferencing</b> <sup>(2,17)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of hackers and disclosing personal information</li> <li>• Reluctance to share personal experiences</li> </ul>
<p><b>Effectiveness</b> <sup>(22)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits comparable to in-person encounters</li> </ul>	<p><b>Disrupted interactions</b> <sup>(4)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network instability, disconnections, etc.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Bonding</b> <sup>(17)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New opportunities for connecting with others</li> </ul>	<p><b>Increased self-consciousness</b> <sup>(4)</sup></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of being watched, which may cause discomfort or stress</li> </ul>

## IN SUM

With older adults increasingly exposed to digital technologies, technological interventions can be a viable means for alleviating loneliness. Videoconferencing, though met with a certain reluctance, presents a number of potential benefits in this regard.

## 2. Considerations when leading an activity online<sup>(7,12)</sup>

The section below lays out the things to consider at three stages of the process: when preparing for the activity (2.1); while the activity is ongoing (2.2); and once the activity is over (2.3).

### 2.1 Before the meeting

#### 2.1.1 Ethical concerns<sup>(3,8,14,16)</sup>

The use of videoconferencing in a group intervention context poses no shortage of procedural and confidentiality challenges. There is currently little research into these issues, while practice guides remain rare.

Privacy and confidentiality

#### Problem

Participants may be reluctant to share information if there are others in the vicinity who are not part of the meeting.

As an online activity, videoconferencing can pose privacy concerns such as the disclosure of confidential information.

#### Proposed solutions

Using headphones or earbuds is recommended. Participants should find a quiet place where they can be alone. The presence of others nearby should be approved beforehand.

Being aware of the privacy policy of the platform in question and using a secure Internet connection are of paramount importance.

## Problem

Turning on the video effectively invites others into participants' living space. Some participants may be uncomfortable with this, feeling exposed.

## Proposed solutions

Set out clear rules at the start of the meeting (e.g. whether the camera can be turned off, using a virtual backdrop to safeguard privacy, making recording the meeting subject to group approval, etc.).

During the meeting, crisis situations in which the facilitator cannot intervene directly could arise (e.g. physical discomfort, strong emotional reactions, etc.).

A protocol must be established and key information (emergency contacts, address, etc.) gathered prior to the first meeting. Due to this issue, videoconferencing is not recommended for people who are emotionally unstable or require immediate care.

For more information:

- **Things to consider before conducting an online intervention [in French]**
  - Ordre des psychologues du Québec (2020). Quelques points de repère pour identifier si nos clients peuvent bénéficier de services de télépsychologie. <https://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/points-de-repere-pour-la-telepsychologie> [Consulted on November 30, 2021].<sup>(18)</sup>
- **Les conseils de sécurité**
  - Université du Québec à Montréal (S.D.). Zoom. <https://enseigner.uqam.ca/outils/zoom/suivre-conseils-securite/#est-ce-que-zoom-est-securitaire> [Consulted on November 30, 2021].<sup>(20)</sup>
- **Safeguarding privacy with Zoom**
  - University of California (S.D.). *Privacy Considerations When Using Zoom*. <https://ethics.berkeley.edu/privacy-considerations-when-using-zoom> [Consulted on November 30, 2021].<sup>(21)</sup>

## 2.1.2 Logistics

- Get participants ready to use the platform (see 3.2 Using the platform)
- Draw up a list of the equipment/materials required for each meeting
- Send participants the materials they need (e.g. workbook, visual aids, photos, etc.) before the first meeting

### CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to the first meeting, the thought of engaging in an online-only activity may be demotivating or difficult.

### ACTIONS

- Share an introductory video to create a visual link with participants and introduce the team.
- Call each participant individually to make contact before the meeting.

## 2.1.3 Setting up the meeting

- Establish the meeting's aims and share these with participants
- Set out clear ground rules
  - Encourage participants to use non-verbal cues (e.g. nods, thumbs up, emoticons, chat, etc.)
  - Invite participants to turn on their cameras, but do not insist on it
  - Keep microphones muted at all times, except where otherwise indicated or while speaking
  - Use an agreed-upon means to request to speak
- Determine how flexible the rules are and how they are to be applied

Allocate extra time for these activities, since everything takes longer online!

- Obtain everyone’s consent before recording the meeting (i.e. for those who are unable to attend)
  - Explain how to access the recording



Encourage participants to attend to avoid having them think they can just rely on the recording!

- Assign a specific role to each member of the facilitation team

## TEAM ROLES



### Technical support specialist

- Helps participants with the platform
- Handles chat sessions and/or phone calls in the event of technical issues



### Facilitator

- Structures and sets up the meeting
- Leads the meeting



### Moderator

- Co-leads the meeting (keeps track of time, moderates speaking turns, etc.)
- Provides technical assistance as needed

## CONSIDERATIONS

Older adults are more easily reached by phone and email.

## ACTIONS

- Prioritize these modes of communication for sharing information between meetings.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Online meetings can be tiring and cognitively demanding.

Lengthy instructions can be difficult to apply and hamper spontaneity.

## ACTIONS

- Opt for shorter, more frequent meetings.
- Schedule break times.
- Lower expectations re: the amount of content to share.
  
- Send instructions before the first meeting so that participants can familiarize themselves with the procedures.
- Go over the instructions at the start of the meeting to ensure that everyone understands.

## 2.2 During the meeting

### 2.2.1 Leading the meeting

- Start each meeting with a “check-in” activity that sounds out the group and gets the discussion off on the right foot
  - E.g. “How is everyone?”, what they know about the topic at hand, sharing something positive from the week, “inner weather report,” etc.
- End with an activity that wraps up on a warm and positive note
  - E.g.: sharing something learned during the meeting, expressing a wish for the week, inviting everyone to say “goodbye,” etc.

- Diversify the meeting format
  - Flipped classroom (at-home videos/readings/exercises followed by group discussion during the meeting)
  - Live polls
  - Google Jamboard

### CONSIDERATIONS

The technology and virtual setting can make establishing authentic connections more difficult.

### ACTIONS

- Create a few virtual “water cooler moments” to allow participants to get to know each other and bond.
- Offer activities that involve breakout sessions (having sub-groups convene in virtual rooms), since people in smaller groups are more likely to share and connect.

## 2.2.2 Using visual aids

- Prepare a visual aid (e.g. PowerPoint presentation, Prezi, whiteboard, etc.) to keep participants engaged during the meeting, especially when the topic at hand is complex or difficult to explain with words alone (for example, theoretical concepts)

## CONSIDERATIONS

Participants who join the meeting by phone will be unable to view the visual aids on certain platforms.

Features used must take participants' knowledge and capacities into account, otherwise interaction will be limited.

The facilitator can lose sight of participants when sharing visual aids.

Participants can lose contact with rest of the group when visuals are shared.

## ACTIONS

- Send paper copies of the documents before the meeting
- Offer verbal cues to give those who dial in a sense of the visuals
- Determine participants' level of technical know-how
- Include time for providing support as they become familiar with the tool
- Read chat messages aloud
- Use two screens: one for the visual aid, the other for seeing the group
- Use screen sharing for educational purposes only, not during discussions
- Prepare supporting documents on paper handouts (e.g. question sheets)
- Remind participants how to select viewing preferences
  - E.g. "Gallery" view in Zoom

## 2.2.3 Speaking in turn

- Structure the discussion
  - Go “around the table” by having the facilitator, moderator or an assigned participant name each speaker in turn, since the order in which participants’ videos (thumbnails) appear onscreen is apt to change
  - Use breakout sessions\* to divide participants into smaller groups (2 to 3 people), with a member from each group reporting on the discussion once everyone reconvenes
- Set a limit for speaking times (be sure to notify participants of this!) and establish a gesture to signal “Time’s up!”
- Allow for a certain amount of spontaneous discussion
- Establish the means by which participants can request to speak (e.g. raising hands, holding up a sign, etc.)

### SAMPLE MEANS



Emoticons



Raised hand



Sign with  
code word



Chat



Virtual  
hand

## 2.2.4 Breaks during the meeting

- Plan short but frequent breaks to keep energy levels up and reduce eye strain

\*Breakout sessions, a feature offered by many platforms (ex: Zoom, Teams), allow smaller groups of participants to meet temporarily in virtual rooms.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Fatigue is more prevalent during virtual meetings and will vary based on each participant's environment (e.g. presence of others, lighting, etc.) and comfort with the technology.

Using technology can increase the mental load if participants have to concentrate on using the tools as well as following the meeting.

## ACTIONS

- Take breaks
- Factor in some fun
- Encourage active breaks (e.g. standing up, doing exercises, etc.) to keep energy from flagging
- Invite participants to move to a different spot
  
- Choose technologies based on participants' level of comfort
- Incorporate new features only gradually

## 2.3 After the meeting

- Establish a mechanism for collecting participant feedback
  - Ask them to share their impressions at the end of the meeting
  - Provide an email address where they can send comments
- Set aside some time for the facilitation and support team to make adjustments
  - Stay behind once the meeting is over
  - Allocate time during the week for feedback on the activity

## IN SUMMARY

Preparing for the activity involves clarifying the roles of the facilitation team and taking technical proficiency into account. During the activity, it is important to diversify the program, take breaks and give participants a chance to bond. The end of the activity is a good time to gather feedback that can be applied to future meetings.

## 3. Technical considerations <sup>(7,12)</sup>

This section presents technical tips on selecting the meeting platform (3.1) and explaining how it works (3.2).

### 3.1 Choosing the platform

- Explore the various platforms and their features to select the one that is the most user-friendly and best meets the needs of the intervention group
  - Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google Meet, Jitsi, etc.
- Choose a platform that also lets people join the meeting by phone

#### CONSIDERATIONS

Levels of technical knowledge differ widely.

#### ACTIONS

- Check accessibility by testing the platform with someone who has little experience with the technology

### 3.2 Using the platform

- Do a run-through with participants before the first meeting to test the platform's features and familiarize everyone with it
- Choose an appropriate means (technical support) for sharing information on how the platform works

## TYPES OF TECHNICAL SUPPORT



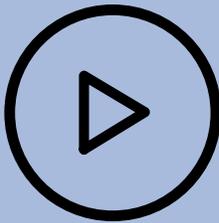
**Document**

### Pros

- Walks participants through the steps
- Highly accessible
- Summarizes key features

### Cons

- Longer to produce and read (in terms of following the steps)
- Must be redone for each new version or update



**Video**

- Shows in real time the maneuvers and movements of the cursor
- Provides a visual overview of how the platform works

- Difficult to watch the video and follow the steps at the same time
- Must be redone for each new version or update



**One-on-One training**

- Provides explanations tailored to the platform in question and participant's level of knowledge

- Difficult to conduct remotely (especially without visual aids)

## CONSIDERATIONS

How the platform looks will vary based on the device (e.g. tablet vs. laptop, Apple vs. Android, etc.).

Updates can alter how the platform looks.

## ACTIONS

- Provide specific instructions for each type of device
- Direct participants to existing tutorials (e.g. YouTube)
- Do a test run with participants and troubleshoot before the meeting

The Conseil québécois du loisir offers additional information on virtual meeting platforms [in French]: <https://www.boiteaoutils-cql.com/numerique> [Consulted November 30, 2021]

## IN SUM

When it comes to technology, people have varying degrees of confidence, aptitude and comfort. For a successful meeting, the selected tools must be accessible to the least experienced of the group and the instructions, clear to all.

# **PART 2: EXPERIENCE DRAWN FROM THE COUNT ME IN! PROGRAM**

## **4. Challenges encountered and solutions proposed**

As part of their winter 2021 coursework, 22 occupational therapy master's students at UQTR tested videoconferencing in the framework of the Count Me In! program (Parisien et al, 2018).\* A pilot project was also conducted with six older adults in summer 2021 as part of the telehealth research project on which this guide is based. The challenges encountered and solutions proposed on the pages below have been compiled based on these experiences and the evidence, with a view to improving videoconference interventions.

### **4.1 Influence of experience with technology**

- **Challenges encountered**

- Stress levels varied greatly among participants, based on their respective levels of technical skill and experience
- During each meeting, a certain amount of time had to be devoted to managing unexpected glitches and explaining the workings of the platform (e.g. how to connect)

\*For more information on the *Count Me In!* program: <https://www.creges.ca/en/count-me-in/>

- **Proposed solutions**

- Determine participants' technical knowledge before starting the activity so you can adjust as needed
- Reassure participants about their abilities
- Do a test run with participants before the first meeting
- Offer different kinds of tech support (e.g. practice run, instruction, user guide, etc.)
- Obtain participants' contact details and provide them with a number to call in the event of technical issues
  - As needed, the technical support specialist can access a participant's screen to provide remote assistance (TeamViewer remote access software, remote control feature on Zoom and Teams, etc.)



Participants must clearly understand what the procedure involves before giving their consent

- **Conclusion**

- Familiarity with videoconferencing is essential to taking part in psychosocial group interventions online. The practice run-through was particularly appreciated by participants, as was knowing they could get support in the event of a technical glitch, which reduced the stress factor. Fewer negative attitudes and fears were expressed by groups composed of participants who had been selected for technical know-how, and to whom students had provided prior reassurance.

## 4.2 Setting up the meeting

- **Challenge encountered**
  - The original meeting format wasn't well suited to videoconferencing
- **Proposed solutions**
  - Adjust content to the virtual format and current context
  - Master the platform in question (detailed grasp of features, etc.)
  - Plan time for adjusting program activities to participants' technical knowledge
  - Prepare additional activities as backup in the event of unexpected issues
- **Conclusion**
  - The meeting format was adapted to videoconferencing. Knowledge-sharing activities and discussions on how to apply what was learned to everyday life were also proposed to participants.

## 4.3 Animation

- **Challenges encountered**
  - In meetings that were co-led, the absence of non-verbal cues complicated communications between the leaders (e.g. to add information, spend less time on certain sections, etc.)
  - Bonding between participants came about less naturally, since people tended to stay silent outside of the group discussions
  - People were reticent about speaking up, giving rise to many silences

- **Proposed solutions**

- Opt for two-person facilitation despite the complications this may entail, since the technology alone poses its share of challenges (e.g. managing screen sharing while moderating the discussion)
- Meeting leaders should maintain regular contact to prepare for and adjust the meetings
- Meeting leaders should devise a means for consulting with each other during the meeting (e.g. during breaks, in a separate room or using the platform's private chat space)
- Suggest that participants remain on screen during breaks or else arrive earlier to allow for informal chats and the chance to bond
- Start and end each meeting with “icebreaker” and “wrap-up” activities that give everyone a chance to learn more about each other
- Diversify the meeting content to prompt participation (e.g. activities in pairs, fun check-ins, small group discussions, breaks, exercises, etc.)

- **Conclusion**

- Videoconferencing doesn't really allow for the kinds of informal chat that would normally take place before and after meetings or during breaks. Still, it can help mitigate loneliness and enable connections between people from different backgrounds (e.g. urban/rural). Indeed, in the framework of *Count Me In!*, the conversations between facilitators and participants were highly appreciated by all, being experienced as rich and rewarding intergenerational encounters.

## 4.4 Using visual aids

- **Challenge encountered**

- During screen sharing, the facilitator found it hard to orchestrate speaking turns, since she couldn't see the entire group
  - This made it hard to capture non-verbal cues, which complicated the interaction

- **Solutions proposed**

- Use two screens when conducting the meeting to maintain a sightline with participants
  - N.B. The facilitator must be sure to explain why they appear to keep looking elsewhere!
- Incorporate stimulating content (e.g. PowerPoint slides, videos, practical exercises, etc.)
  - Use the “virtual whiteboard” feature to note down responses to an exercise (if participants are comfortable with the feature)
- Mail participants a workbook prior to the meeting to limit screen sharing

- **Conclusion**

- Interactive content fosters engagement with the activity and may prove a useful ally during meetings. However, keep in mind that the visual aid must not cause attention to wander or otherwise throw the discussion off-track.

## 4.5 Speaking in turn

- **Challenges encountered**

- The flow of conversation was sometimes compromised and people tended to interrupt
- Managing who got to speak at any one time while maintaining a supportive relationship and moderating the conversation called for great skill on the part of the facilitator
- Coming up with a structured-yet-flexible system that was easy to understand was challenging
- In certain groups, having participants raise their hands to speak created confusion
  - Some raised their hands outside of the camera's field of view, which meant they got overlooked
- Having to repeatedly manage microphones stalled the conversation and prolonged the meetings
- Meetings were sometimes disrupted by ambient noise (e.g. ringing phones, barking dogs, etc.)

- **Proposed solutions**

- Cut back the number of participants per group to make it easier to see and hear everyone
  - While a tablet affords a view of up to 16 people, it's better to limit the number to six to obtain a better visual of each participant
- Keep in mind that silences are normal. Use the usual supportive techniques and do not attempt to fill silences. Instead of asking whether everyone has understood, ask participants about the reasons for the silence
- Allow for more time for using the technology and overcoming disjointed communication
- Use clear non-verbal communication to indicate active listening while avoiding superfluous sounds (e.g. "okay," "mmm," etc.)
- Encourage participants to join the meeting from a quiet place where they can be undisturbed

- **Conclusion**

- Smaller groups tend to make participants open up. Those who were divided into groups of two or four were very positive about their experience. Offering group programs helps break through social isolation.

**IN  
SUM**

As part of the *Count Me In!* videoconference, a key factor for success was taking the time to become conversant with the online format so as to be able to offer adequate support.

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