

# S.O.S. for Working Moms:

## 5 Tips to Minimize Zoom Disasters

By Angela DeFinis



As more and more mothers are working from home and engaging in online presentations and virtual meetings daily (all while dealing with kids and pets underfoot), it's clear that the current set up is designed to fail. Unfortunately, there are few rules of engagement to apply when your kitchen table is suddenly your office (and your child's classroom). And we're all seeing the results of this every day: crying toddlers in the background of important meetings, the dog barking at the delivery driver just as the speaker is making a key point, the offscreen audible whisper of "Mom, can I have a snack?" ... and this is on a good day!

Historically, working mothers experience intense frustration, social isolation, and lack of support. Now they are not only working from home, but they are also homeschooling and, in many cases, the primary caregiver of young children. As such, they are managing never-before-seen levels of anxiety and stress.

With so few guidelines, many have taken a "let the chips fall where they may" strategy. But going with the flow only goes so far in helping you manage the situation and can lead to deeper frustration. So rather than feel annoyed or anxious about your online meetings and what others will think about your professionalism, take the reins and give yourself permission to set new rules of engagement that work for you and your household so you can restore a level of control, personal well-being and yes, even peace.

When your next Zoom disaster threatens to strike, take these steps to help recover from the interruption and regain your composure.

- 1. Plan for the worst:** First, accept that things will go wrong and no matter how much you plan, interruptions are going to happen. But that's no reason to avoid putting a plan in place. Disasters are more prone to happen when you "wing it," so at the very least outline your meeting topic with a reliable beginning, middle,

and end structure. Make sure to include transition points, so if you are interrupted by a family matter you will have a natural place to pause. Double down on what you can control: Your appearance (wear solid colors), lighting (make sure the light is in front of your face and not behind you), your computer set up (make sure your stand is stable and your computer raised to eye level), and timing (be ready in advance).

- 2. Distinguish between distraction vs. disaster:** The dog barking at the delivery driver is a distraction, not a crisis. However, hearing a loud crash followed by a piercing shriek from your toddler is a crisis and needs to be handled immediately. Identify what family incidents fall into each category so you can prioritize when and how to take action. Ask your older children to help you create this list and agree to adhere to it. Keep it in front of you for every online meeting and don't let simple distractions pull away your attention. Forewarned is forearmed.
- 3. Avoid bleeding into the meeting:** Your state of mind when entering a virtual meeting can be a set up for success or disaster. If you just had an argument with your teenager and are already angry and stressed it is hard to remain calm and focused. Do what actors do—leave your emotions backstage and clear your mind with this actor's trick: Think of a famous person you admire and imagine this person sitting next to you in the meeting. How would you behave if a notable individual like Oprah, for example, were actually in the room? This tried and true technique will help you turn potential disaster into success.
- 4. Use humor to calm discomfort:** In more casual online meetings where there is some level of familiarity with those you are speaking with, humor goes a long way to help defuse awkward and uncomfortable situations. If you can be gracious, laugh, and make a joke of the situation during the inevitable interruptions ("It sounds like the dog has something important to add to this conversation") you will be better able to take control and show grace under pressure.
- 5. Plan a back-up presenter.** For more formal virtual presentations where the stakes are high, plan a back-up presenter. Think of it like an understudy—someone in the meeting who knows the information as well as you do and who can step in at a moment's notice. This way when your child runs up to you crying or the smoke alarm goes off from your teen's cooking experiment, you simply say, "Everyone, Jana is going to cover the remainder of this point. Please excuse me for a moment."

But what if you don't have anyone on the call who knows as much about the topic as you do? Empower a junior colleague with 2-3 questions that you plan in advance so he or she can lead a discussion during your absence. Plan questions like: "What key points have stood out for you?" or "What questions do you have at this point?" Coach your colleague to gather information and brief you when you return.

## Create Your Own Rules

No one knows when in-person meetings will be 100% safe, but we do know that virtual meetings and online presentations from home will continue to be challenging. So whatever you do, don't give up! Try new strategies, be kind and forgiving to yourself and others, and continue to change your approach until you reach a level of comfort and control that works for you and your family. Remember that even the most skilled virtual presenters struggle with this medium at times. And as a working mother, you have more on your plate and more at stake. But by implementing these strategies, you can quickly recover from a Zoom disaster and know that in this one small area of your work life, you've got this!



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Angela DeFinis is President of DeFinis Communications. The company offers executive speech coaching, presentation skills training, and virtual video conferencing training. Through corporate sponsored and open-enrollment programs, the firm's unique skill building approach helps business professionals become poised, polished, and powerful communicators capable of leading effective meetings and delivering compelling presentations. To sign up for an online session please go to [www.definiscommunications.com](http://www.definiscommunications.com)