
The Friendly Guide to attending your first health professionals conference



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2nd Edition.

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Introduction

Brilliant! You've found the funding, secured a place and you're off to your very first conference. How exciting is this?

Dedicated time to submerge yourself in your community, to spend time with people who are passionate about the same things as you, to get up to date on new developments and rub shoulders with the great and good of your world.

Your first conference experience may be a national gathering of several hundred people or it may be an international conference with several thousands of people. Whatever the size if this is the first time you've attended a major conference you may be feeling a little like a fish out of water. Even more so if you don't know anyone else who is going.

Whenever we enter a new situation we can feel a little off kilter until we find our feet. Everyone else seems to know what they are doing and that can make us feel an outsider. There is so much to cram in. The pressure is on to make the most of our time which can feel overwhelming.

Well, we've all been in that situation and each of us has experienced those feelings which is why we've written the *Friendly Guide To Attending Your First Health Professionals Conference*.

We have pooled together our thoughts, what we've learnt from our experiences and what we've gleaned for colleagues in an attempt to support you in making the most of your first conference.

We want to help you think about how you can prepare beforehand and how you can maximise the experience during and after the event.

As importantly, we want to prompt you to think a little about how you want to present yourself at what is a major networking opportunity.

But most of all we want to help you have fun and enjoy the experience.

Lynne,



Rob,



Orla,



Catherine,



Katie,



Making the best use of your time



It's your first conference, the abstract book has arrived and you realise you've got a mind boggling number of sessions to choose from. So many sessions, so little time! How do you choose the best ones? What else should you think about attending? What should you do during those sessions? This section is going to explore those questions and more.

Start planning well in advance

We know this is easier said than done. It may be tempting to put this off until the start of the conference, but don't! Believe us there isn't much time to consider things once a conference has started and you wouldn't want to miss out due to lack of preparation would you?

It's so tempting to leave the planning until the day you arrive or to tell yourself, 'I'll do it on the train/plane on the way to the conference'. Then you meet someone else on the journey and spend the time catching up and chatting and bang goes your planning time. Don't kid yourself that you will get the most out of a conference by deciding how to use your time once you arrive - you won't.



Most large conferences run concurrent streams of sessions which means at any one time you will have multiple choices of where to go. If you are going to a large international conference spanning three days there can be over 400 sessions to choose from. Add to this the fact that the number of people admitted to sessions may be limited you don't want to be the one who arrives late because you've been trying to decide where to go only to find the room is full to capacity and you can't get in.

Most conferences publish an abstracts, either on-line or sent to you, well in advance of the meeting and this is your opportunity to think about the sessions you want to attend. So, sit down and get a feel for the different sessions and think carefully, at your leisure, about how you want to spend your time.

The general structure

Whilst every conference is unique and will have its own structure there is a common format which many follow. This comprises a number of keynote lectures, where all the delegates come together, a series of parallel sessions where you, as a delegate, can select from a range of sessions which run concurrently and poster sessions providing the opportunity to discuss the poster content with presenters. The other key component of large conferences are exhibitions and fringe meetings usually held at the start or end of the day or over lunchtime.

Keynotes

Keynotes usually occur at the start and end of the conferences with others being programmed throughout the event. They are held in the main auditorium and are billed as one of the conference highlights. They are a time during which an issue of significance to the audience is addressed. This may be a politician providing insight into a new policy initiative or a key figure in your profession exploring an area of relevance to everyone.

If the conference is organised by a professional body or a national clinical organisation there may also be a specific keynote in which a member of the profession has been invited, as an honour, to give the presentation.

Parallel Sessions

Parallel sessions are designed to give you choice. The number of concurrent sessions will depend on the size of the conference. As we have said already you need to do some preparation to select which sessions to attend. It's also worth noting that the format of these sessions will vary. Some will comprise 3 or 4 formal presentations, others may be interactive workshops or seminars.

Poster Sessions

Poster sessions vary in terms of how they are structured but there is usually time dedicated to poster viewing within the conference programme. It's usual for posters to be put up before the session to give you time to look at them in advance and abstracts for posters are usually published in the abstract book. It's worth reading the abstracts and making note of the posters you would like to visit to discuss with the presenter. Some presenters will have prepared handouts of their poster for you to take away but always ask permission before you take a photo. Don't assume it is OK - it may not be.



Fringe Meetings

AGMs, advice drop-ins and meetings of special interest groups are also a feature of large conferences. Information about these sessions is usually included in the abstract book so make sure you check out what's going on. It may mean an early morning start or late evening finish but these are a great opportunity to get an insight into a special interest group or focus on a specific area of practice. They're also a way of developing your networks within a defined area of practice.

If the conference is an annual conference of a professional body or clinical forum it is highly likely that there will be a point in the programme when the annual general meeting (AGM) is held. AGMs are formal business meetings open to members of the organisation or clinical forum. If you are not a member you will not be able to attend. The meetings start, usually, with a review of the years activity, financial accounts are presented and approved, amendments to the organisations constitution are sometimes presented and voted upon and officers may be appointed. This is then followed by the meeting being opened for questions about the work of the organisation. This may not sound like your cup of tea but if you have never been to an AGM go and find out what it's like. This is your professional body and this is an important opportunity to engage with it and develop your understanding of how it works.

Alongside the formal fringe meetings sometimes groups take the opportunity for informal meet-ups. It's worth keeping an eye on social media or the conference notice board as this is where such meet-ups tend to be communicated.

Exhibitions

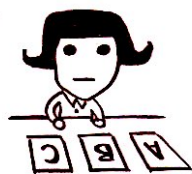
Exhibitor stands are a great place for information, and you can learn a lot from exploring them. Exhibitors will include commercial companies promoting products, recruitment agencies, professional bodies, special interest groups and prospective employers. There may also be voluntary organisations exhibiting who provide a wealth of information to support your practice. Some of these organisations may also be funders of CPD, fellowship awards and research, so ensure you visit these stands and chat with the representatives to explore what they have to offer.

There may be stands representing specialist sections/forums which require membership. It's a good idea to have a think beforehand if any of them might be of interest to you. Visit the stands for more information to see how being a member can aid your professional practice. One thing to remember is that all membership organisations have a subscription year. Check out where in the annual membership cycle you are and, if it is nearing the end, whether the fee is being discounted.

Of course, to entice you onto their stands exhibitors often offer freebies. Keep an eye out for competitions or chances to further your continued professional development at the stands! For example, there may be opportunities at one conference to win tickets to attend another.

Conference organisers will always encourage delegates to visit the exhibition area and there is a very good reason for this. Exhibitors pay to attend conferences as part of their marketing strategy and the income from the exhibitors subsidises the delegate rate. They will only continue to support a conference if they feel it is of value to their business and that is judged by the number of people who visit their stand and the quality of the discussions they have with people. This is why refreshments tend to be served in the exhibition space. The exhibition is open usually for the whole of conference, but may close early on the final day, so if you want some downtime from attending sessions they provide a space to shift gear slightly.

Which sessions do I attend?



Faced with a large choice it can be a challenge to decide which sessions to go to. This will, to a large extent, depend on what you're looking to get out of the conference. Are you aiming to learn about a specific topic? This can make life a little easier as you can choose those sessions first, and build other sessions around them.

Maybe you want to get an insight into a broad range of topics and to attend as many sessions as possible? In which case you may want to look for session led by key thought leaders or develop a programme based on a mixture of different kinds of sessions.

Or maybe what you attend is affected by others. If you are the only person in your department going to a conference, ask your line manager if there are any specific sessions they would like you to feedback on, especially if your employer is paying.

If it is your first conference, an easy mistake to make can be trying to get to too many sessions and leaving no gaps to digest information, reflect and consider the information you have just learnt. By the end of three or more sessions in a row, your brain will be on overload. Conference days can be long days. Early morning sessions can start from 7.30am onwards and go on well into the night if you decide to attend fringe meetings.

Therefore, give yourself and your brain a break. Avoid going to sessions just for the sake of filling up time. If they're of no interest it's unlikely you'll learn anything or maintain your concentration throughout the whole session. Instead use the time for personal reflection and to consolidate the knowledge that has just been imparted.



Do I need to book sessions?

How you book onto sessions will vary from conference to conference. Some may require you to book in advance, others you just turn up at the allotted time.

Be aware that some sessions will be popular and oversubscribed. Another reason for exploring the abstract book prior to going to a conference. If you have to book in advance, it's worth making a note of the date from which you can start booking as popular sessions will book up fast!

If sessions are on a first come basis, get familiar with the layout of the conference centre so that you have a vague idea of where different sessions are. This may sound obvious but don't underestimate the size and complex layout of large conference venues. It's always worth having a plan B in case you cannot get into a session.

Large conferences may offer a range of workshops and sessions which are additional to the main programme and, in some instances, will incur an extra charge. These will usually require advance booking either before the conference starts or at the registration desk during the conference itself.

What to do in a session?

Firstly, this will vary depending on the type of session it is. There can be sessions comprising of three or four shorter presentations, longer seminars or interactive workshops. Check out what kind of session you are attending as some may require you to do a bit of background reading.

You don't have to prepare questions in advance, but if you have read the abstract and have a couple of burning questions there's no harm in writing them down so you can ask them if they haven't been addressed during the sessions.

During sessions you may want to use Twitter. Many conferences now have hashtags attached to them. Tweeting your key points will help you to remember key messages and to connect with others that have been to the same sessions, to keep the conversation going after the session.

Most people will allow you to take photos of their slides, although it is always worth asking in advance. This can help jog your memory and is a way of retaining information. If a presenter asks you not to take pictures of their slides respect their request. There will be a reason for this request.

On the issue of asking questions



Usually it will be clarified at the beginning of a session how to go about this. For example, in sessions with several presentations, the chair will clarify if the questions are to be asked between presentations or at the end.

Be brave! There is no such thing as a stupid question and the likelihood is that if you are thinking it, someone else is too. Although it can be nerve-wracking, especially in larger conferences where you may have to leave your seat to go to a microphone, muster your courage the majority of people will be just as nervous. Often you can gain valuable information from questions and you will be helping other people as well.

However, if you are too nervous at the time, or the opportunity for questions is cut short before you have a chance to ask yours, you may still have the opportunity to talk to the presenter at the end of the session. Ask them if they have a minute to talk. If they are rushing off to their next session ask them if it would be okay to contact them later with your questions. Most will be amenable to giving you their email address and answering questions this way.

What else to do?

There are also usually great opportunities to network during down time between sessions, and it is worth taking these opportunities with the reassurance that many other people are doing the same thing. We've written a section on this later on.

As well as this, it is also important to take some time out for yourself, to reflect on everything you have been learning. It is great to be fully involved, but it will be more worth it if you have a bit of time to yourself to really consider everything.

Most of all, don't forget to enjoy conference! What you actually do and attend during a conference is completely personal and it's important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to do it!

Networking



Social interaction can be daunting, especially at professional events where you may feel at the bottom of the chain. When you imagine walking into your first conference what comes into your mind? Do you imagine yourself engaged in meaningful conversations or wandering around wondering how everyone else seems to know each other?

The good news is that you have already taken your first step to building your networks - you are there! Attending a conference is the perfect way to start networking as you are meeting people in your profession while learning together. This shared purpose gives ample opportunity for conversation to take place and connections to happen. However, we would urge you not to leave networking to chance. Build some intention around it.

Reflecting on our experiences of attending our first conference here are some steps to networking smarter:

Step one: Preparation is key

In thinking about networking it is helpful to understand the distinction between general **networking**, *interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts* and **strategic networking** which is, *networking with a defined goal*. At any conference you will be involved in networking but strategic networking requires preparation and intent. Getting to know the speakers and their topics, checking out the exhibitors, and looking at the fringe meetings. This is about planning to be in the right place at the right time for the conversations you want to have.

For example, there may be someone who is presenting on a topic relevant to your dissertation, or there may be a specific employer or funding body who has an exhibitors stand. When you network strategically you build intention around some of the conversations you want to have. In previous sections of this guide, we have highlighted the importance of looking through the abstract book before you arrive to help you plan your time. It is also an opportunity to think about and plan some of the conversations you want to have.

Rather than filling your time solely with sessions based on formal presentations look out for some of the more interactive sessions where instead of just listening to a speaker, you are debating an issue or discussing points around a table.

If it's on offer, attend a session aimed at first-time attendees as you will gain practical tips with people in the same situation as you and it's a great opportunity to start your networking. You will no longer be 'Billy no mates' as you will have met other people in the same situation as you.

Another point to consider in advance is how are people going to keep in touch with you after the conference? Social media can be your best friend for engaging with others before, during, and after the conference. For example, before the conference, find out the conference hashtags and arrange to meet with people for coffee. Find out about dinners or social events that are happening in the evenings which you can go along to, especially if you are attending on your own.



Step two: Practise the art of conversation

Having a conversation is certainly not rocket science but when we are in a new situation our communication skills can go a little haywire. We may be more focused on listening to our own self-talk about not knowing what to say, feeling like a fraud, or feeling self-conscious rather than on seeing openings to dive into a pool of new opportunities.

Most of us know this territory well and some things to consider include:

- If you have a tendency to talk faster when you're nervous - do your need to slow your speech down?
- Are you sitting glued to your phone or tablet not making eye contact with anyone? If so PUT IT AWAY - make your body language friendly and approachable. Nothing says, 'don't talk to me' more than a person sitting glued to their technology.
- Do you have a tendency to talk too much? An important part of networking is sharing, it is a two way process. Think about what percentage of time you speaking and what percentage of time you are listening. Be interested in what other people have to share and give them the breathing space to share it.
- When the other person is speaking are you really listening to what they are saying or planning what you are going to say next?
- If you are concerned about having conversations with new people remember that you have a lot in common. You are all at the same conference and that in itself is a good topic for conversation, 'What are you learning so far?' What great sessions have you been to? can be used to start a conversation with anyone you find yourself sitting next to.

If you are still not convinced think about how you use this skill in clinical settings. You are meeting new people all the time and starting up conversations. Doing this at conference is no different. It's a basic clinical skill. Ok, so it may be one that is still being honed but what a fabulous opportunity to build that particular muscle. Practice makes perfect and remember you are not looking to create strong and life-long connections with everyone you meet (although you may be lucky enough to do this). You've got this covered so take the pressure off yourself and just go for it.

Step three: Know and challenge yourself

Are you extroverted or introverted? Do you prefer to talk about facts or abstract concepts? Do you strive to keep conversations harmonious, even when you disagree? Are you naturally shy?

Don't try to be someone you are not, there's nothing worse or more exhausting. Have a think about how you prefer to communicate and socialise with others and how you can bring that into your interactions.

Maybe it's time to be a little more courageous and stretch yourself. Challenge yourself to try out a new way of interacting, a new way of being. If you are shy set a goal for the number of times a day you can introduce yourself to people you don't know.

Step Four: Be a connector

The first three steps will start your journey to becoming a star networker but let's think outside the box a little and step outside of our comfort zones. How can we stand out from the crowd? One solution is to change our mindset about the people we are going to meet. Networking can be seen as all about self-promotion with a self-centred attitude. This is absolutely not the case.

To develop lasting connections you need to view your time networking as time spent listening and then sharing your story and knowledge. It is not about treating people like objects and thinking constantly 'what can I get out of this relationship? What's in this for me?' Instead, as you meet people and find out their passions, begin to play matchmaker and connect the people you have met together. Becoming part of a bigger jigsaw puzzle, widens your network and creates deeper relationships.

Step 5: Follow up

Finally, following-up on your new connections is discussed later but we want to emphasise it here. There will be people you meet that you want to keep in touch with. There may be people you have promised to share information with that you don't have to hand at conference. It is so easy, when you get home and back into your normal routine, to not follow-up. Contact them as soon as possible. You don't want to become a distant memory in their mind when they are reading your email or receive an invitation to connect on social media.

Some important questions to ask of yourself at a conference.

How do I want to be?

Conferences are a fantastic way of developing networks, making connections and extending our thinking. Of breathing life back into us, energising and connecting us with our community of practice. So far we have focused on pretty practical aspects of going to a conference but before you throw yourself into the whirl of workshops, poster sessions and socialising here is something else to think about - what kind of preparation will you do each day before you head off to the conference centre? Check the timetable, make plans for meeting up with people etc etc.



We'd like to offer an alternative question you might like to ask yourself at the start of each new conference day. Rather than thinking about, 'what do I want to do' how about.....'**How do I want to BE?**'

Why? Because the answer to this question will frame your day and your experience. Do I want to be energised, courageous, curious, reflective, challenging, sociable; full of life, creative? Then give some thought to what it means to you to be that way. Maybe being brave or courageous for you means having the confidence to ask the question you really want to ask but feel nervous about. Maybe it's about standing up and giving your first ever presentation and injecting energy

and sparkle into what you are saying. Perhaps being sociable means putting down your mobile and talking to the people sitting next to you.

A short exercise to do to help you connect with your way of being.

This exercise will only take a few minutes and is a good exercise to do every day not just on conference days.

Take a few moment to sit quietly and think about how you want to be today.

What comes up for you when you think about this?

Once you have identified how you want to be take yourself to a 'peak experience' - a time in your life when you felt that way. Relive it. Really connect with how it felt.

- Where were you?
- What were you doing, how did it feel?
- Were you on your own or were others with you?

And then take that feeling with you to conference and live it. Importantly remember to check in with yourself during the day to see if you are honouring it.

What will my conference gasp be?

The concept of a 'gasp' is taken from Tara Mohr's book, [Playing Big](#) which focuses on supporting women to bring their full potential into the world. If you check out her website you can download her [10 Rules for Brilliant Women](#), a workbook which acts as an introduction to her work and here is rule 3:

Start doing things that make you gasp and get the adrenaline flowing. Ask yourself, "What's the gasp-level action here?" Your fears and a tough inner critic will chatter in your head. That's normal, and just fine.

Whenever we think big, many of us will have an inner critic whispering in our ears things like, 'you can't do that', 'you will look stupid if you ask that question', 'you're only a student you can't go and talk to her she's too important'.

This rule is a call to quieten that voice and stretch ourselves into a new more courageous space.

So here's another question to think about -

If you are attending any conference what will be your conference gasp?

Maybe you are presenting for the first time and your gasp will be giving your presentation. But if not what can you commit to that will stretch you out of your comfort zone? It doesn't have to be a massive change the world kind of stretch, although brilliant if it is, but something which moves you from your comfort zone.

It might be standing up, taking the microphone and asking a question, it might be approaching an 'expert' in your field and asking them a question or it might be signing up to Twitter and sending your first tweet into the Twitter sphere. Whatever it is, for it to be a gasp, it needs to be something

that, when you think about it, makes your heart beat faster or gives you butterflies in your stomach.

There are many opportunities to do things that make us gasp at a conference and the one thing to know for sure is that you are amongst colleagues, within your community where people will be cheering you on.

So acknowledge those jitters, see them for what they are - a sign that you are stretching and growing and go for your very own conference gasp or two, or three.

How can I speak so that people listen?

If you are going to a conference you will be doing a lot of talking. Meeting up with friends and colleagues, making new connections or perhaps giving a formal presentation. Thinking about this we have revisited one of the most popular TED talks of all time given by [Julian Treasure](#), 'How to speak so that people want to listen'. Lasting for 10 minutes, we'd really encourage you to watch it.



What to expect if you watch the video?

Well, firstly it's relevant whatever kind of speaking you will be doing whether it's giving a presentation or having a conversation. It encourages us to reflect firstly on the kinds of conversations we have. Most conference conversations are brief and fleeting. We may only have a few minutes to talk with someone between sessions or at posters. We may be meeting someone for the first time. This being the case how do we want to use that time to make a real connection?

The talk starts off by introducing 7 deadly sins of speaking (the things not to do):

Gossip	Judging
Negativity	Complaining
Excuses	Lying/embroidery
Dogmatism	

It then goes on to explore 4 corner stones and speaking powerfully

Honesty	Authenticity
Integrity	Love

Hmmm. If you look at those two lists which one resonates with you in terms of the kind of conversations you would like to be part of? Julian Treasure then goes on to give some practical advice about how to make the most of your voice and demonstrates a few warm-up exercises for your voice which will be helpful to anyone giving a formal presentation.

There are many reasons why this TED talk is one of the all time greats. It's fun to listen to and will make you smile, it's also a call to consider not only the kinds of conversations you may have but the ways in which you can use your voice to better effect.

Don't forget to celebrate your gasps!

So much happens around a conference. They are busy times. Sessions to attend, people to catch up with, places to go. In the midst of all this busyness it is easy to pass over the moments when something changes for us that we should be celebrating. The moment we took a step into new territory, quietened our inner critic and did something we have never done before. We leave conference in a different place to the one we started in.

There are so many ways in which this can happen. The obvious one is that you may be giving a poster or presentation for the first time and boy is that something to celebrate. There is a real temptation to focus on the things you could have done better. We all do it, engage in such self-talk as:

- 'I didn't answer that question well,'
- 'I had to rush the last few slides',
- 'My voice, hands, whole body were shaking so much people must have noticed'
- 'My slides weren't as good as other people'
- 'People looked bored'

But hang on a moment - what about the alternatives:

- I've done a first presentation
- I've made a contribution to the conference
- I answered that question well
- I got some good feedback

Of course such occasions are learning experiences and a time to develop further. A good way to ensure that you are balanced in your reflection, is to answer the following 2 questions

1) 'what went well'

2) 'even better if'

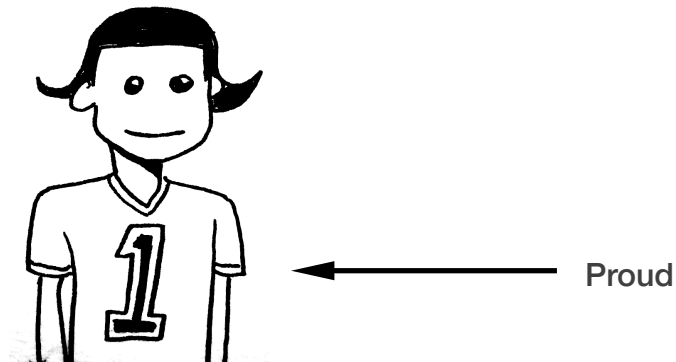
AND don't forget to give as much attention to the 'what went well'.

But let's think more widely than this, there are other moments deserving of recognition. It may be the first time you have ever attended a professional or academic conference, you may not have known anyone else going and felt nervous about how the whole experience.

It may be the first time you have summoned up the courage to put your hand up at the end of a session and ask a question. Or it may be the first time you have put your hand up, been given the microphone and asked a question in one of the main sessions in front of the whole conference (how brilliant is that?).

Everyone talks about the networking opportunities at conference but it takes courage to network. You see the leaders of your profession, people whose work you have long admired, researchers at the top of their game. You summon up the courage to introduce yourself and have a conversation.

Don't let moments like these go by unmarked. Share it with someone, do a happy dance, stand tall and proud. This is your moment and you will never be in the position of saying or feeling, 'I'm nervous because I haven't done this before'. You have taken a step forward and ended up in a different place.



What happens at conference does NOT stay at conference!

Fanning the flames

For many people there are moments during a conference which inspire them to think bigger, to imagine taking steps they hadn't imagined before and to move from thinking about something to actually committing to doing it.

There will be presentations which energised you and people who inspired you. You will have notes and a small pile of business cards and email addresses and now the challenge is to make sure you do the follow-up work. You need to reconnect with that energy within a day or so of getting home to actually use it and fan the flame. One thing is for sure the longer you leave it the more likely it is to fade.

You may have been in a session and really loved a presentation but not had time to ask a question or talk with the speaker. It's not too late, send them an email and tell them how much you appreciated their presentation and if you have a question ask it.

Or you may have wanted to tell someone that their work inspired you to do something differently - do it. We are not always great at telling people about the positive impact they have on us and yet we know how much it means for someone to say it especially in the current highly pressurised climate.

You may have talked with someone, made a connection and exchanged email addresses, saying, 'we must talk further'. So email them, arrange a time to talk or meet. You may have been inspired to submit an abstract for next years conference - sign up to be notified when the call for abstracts for the next conference is open. You may have left inspired to make a change in your practice. What do you need to do next week to move this forward?



We get energised by having time and space to think, by meeting new people who open up new horizons and by connecting with the values of why we do what we do. It gives us a buzz and can take us to a place of thinking bigger. Of course it's hard to sustain energy and drive when we get back to our

workplace but it doesn't have to be that way.

We can make positive choices about how we channel that energy and tap into the emotions we felt. Even if it feels scary build upon your conference energy within a next day or so of getting home and don't let it fizzle out.

Sharing your learning

If you've been fortunate to attend a professional conference or training programme then it's your responsibility to take back what you've learnt and make use of it. This is especially the case if you've received funding for the place. In some instances feeding back on your learning may be a requirement of your funding with your funder requesting a short article about your experience and your learning.

Give this the time and attention it deserves, don't just see it as a tick box exercise. If you're able to demonstrate what you've learnt and how it will improve your practice and your team's practice then you'll be more likely to be funded for courses in the future.



Feeding back doesn't have to be via a standard powerpoint presentation and it doesn't only have to happen once you've returned to work. The more dynamic the feedback then the more useful it will be to all. So here are a few ideas...

- Blog and tweet during the conference. Who says you have to wait until you're back in the office or at the next team meeting before you have to feedback? Live interaction is a huge part of conferences now. Why not use the conference hashtag and one of your own so that your colleagues can follow live. If you are a pre-registration student does your programme or student society have their own Twitter account? If so include them in your tweet. If you are giving a presentation include your Trusts Twitter handle in a tweet.
- Make a summary of trends and have small discussions back at base about each one and whether it could be something to focus on in your workplace.
- Take photos of the posters and slides throughout the conference and create collages in themes or by session to highlight key points – ***always get permission first.***
- Make note of and share discussions you've had with other delegates.
- Write down a summary of each session you attend. This can either be 5 bullet points per session, or use this handy sheet we've included further on which evidences your thoughts and learning nicely. One side of paper per session is more than enough to feed back to your colleagues!
- Use a small amount of your breaks to have time out and write a quick summary/blog/diary entry and tweet with the conference hashtag. But don't use the whole break for this, after all you are there to network and actually talk to people, not to hide behind a screen or notebook!
- If you are required to do a presentation to feedback to your team then it's vital that it's punchy, informative, captures the mood and feeling of the conference and is relevant to your team's needs. You could break slides into themes, or snap shots of sessions you

attended. Add in plenty of photographs and even video clips if they are accessible from the conference.

- Make it as enjoyable as you found the conference. Remember to include your thoughts and reflections of how you feel the sessions you attended could contribute to developing ideas within the team or in specific areas of practice. If you have collected information from posters or seminars then add in the links to this and circulate the PowerPoint after, that way you are not bombarding your team with information but sharing enough to interest them in a short space of time.

This is not an exhaustive list, the more creative you can be the more everyone will get from you attending the conference, have fun with feedback!

Catherine has designed a template to support you in reflecting and keeping track of your conference learning. Print some off to take with you. We promise it will make feeding back easier rather than rifling through pages of scattered notes and jottings.

Session Title: _____ Date: _____

CPD Event REFLECTION

Presenter details

Initial thoughts during the session

Questions to ask

Ideas to take away

Reflections

For me

For my profession

For my clients

For my team

Those niggling questions

Whenever we go into a new situation we all have niggling questions - you know the ones that feel too trivial to own up to. No one wants to look or feel like a newbie so we tend to keep them to ourselves. Well, here are some of those questions that we've asked ourselves the first time we went to a large professional conference laid out in all their glory.

What happens at registration?

The first port of call is the registration desk. This is where you are checked in and given your lanyard and conference bag. At larger conferences registration may start the day before the conference so check this out on the pre-conference material you receive. If you are arriving early for the conference, registering early will give you more breathing space on the first day.

Will there be a conference bag?

Most large conferences provide you with a conference bag at registration. These usually contain the abstract book, either as a paperback or on a pen drive, your lanyard and a range of marketing material. If you don't plan to use the conference bag just tell the people on the desk you don't want one. There's no need to take one only to throw it away or leave it in your hotel room.

If you use the conference bag have some way of identifying yours. Everyone will be carrying the same bag so it's not easy to pick yours out if they get left in a pile somewhere or you happen to lose it.

Do I need to wear the lanyard?

Nearly all conferences will provide you with a lanyard. Keep it with you throughout the conference as it usually doubles up as a security check giving you access to the conference and exhibition areas.

Will there be a cloakroom/luggage store?

Large conferences, especially those held in conference centres do have cloakrooms and a luggage store - there may be a small charge for using these. This may not be the case in a smaller venue. Check with the organisers if you think you may need to leave luggage either when you arrive or on the final day.



What about refreshments?

Refreshments are usually included in the conference fee and are normally located in the exhibition area. If you have special dietary requirements make sure you complete this section of the application form. Don't expect to turn up on the day and be able to have specific requirements met.

Also this may seem obvious but keep hydrated. When you're rushing from session to session it's very easy to forget about this. Large conference centres usually have many water fountains but it's a good idea to have your own supply as well.

The day can be long and the time for breaks may feel rushed. So make sure that you have breakfast to set yourself up for the day ahead. It's also a good idea to carry some small snacks with you, cereal bars, nuts, fruit just in case you need a quick energy boost.

Get to know the layout

If your first conference is large with several streams of concurrent sessions take a few moments to orientate yourself. Concurrent sessions can take place in obscure parts of a conference centre which may take some tracking down. There is usually a map of the venue in the conference information.

Time between sessions is limited and if you don't know where you are going you could be the one turning up for a popular session just as the room reaches capacity and the doors are closed. Be aware that there are often long queues for toilets in breaks between sessions. Again in large conference settings toilets are located in many areas not just the ones directly next to the exhibition area of the main auditorium which are usually really busy. So check the location of those out as well.

What's the dress code?



Slightly difficult to answer as this will vary from conference to conference. If you are giving either an oral or poster presentation then you definitely need to dress professionally which means smart/smart casual. If you are attending as a delegate then smart casual usually works. One thing to remember is that you will be interacting with potential employers, funders, and building your networks so think about how you want other people to perceive you.

If you are in a conference centre you will probably find yourself sitting in a range of different temperatures throughout the course of the day. They can become cold if you are sitting for any period of time, especially if you happen to be close to an air conditioning unit. They can become very hot if you are in a crowded parallel session - so think, 'layers'.

A word about shoes. You may be doing a lot of walking and standing so make sure you have something comfortable on your feet.

How do I keep track of my learning?

We've suggested some ways of doing this in earlier sessions but give it some thought before the conference starts. Scraps of paper aren't the best - have a notebook where you can keep everything in one place - not just notes from sessions but notes from conversations you've had and any contact details you may have gathered etc.

What if I have special requirements?

You will always be asked on the conference application form if you have any special requirements so make sure you complete this section. When you register ask the person who is registering you what arrangements have been made not just to meet your requirements within the main auditorium but also in the breakout rooms. If you experience any difficulties during the session let the organisers know, don't struggle on.

A final thought

The reason *why* conferences exist is so that people like *you* can attend. It's easy to forget that and feel overwhelmed but this is *your* event, not *theirs*. You are an intrinsic part of the whole. Without you and your colleagues, there is no conference. You *are* the conference.

Every event is different as is everyone who attends, but together, you create



something more than just a gathering of 'like minds'. The communal energy a conference generates can spiral upwards in a flurry of new ideas, fresh connections and the fireworks of possibility. It is a wonderful thing to be part of and the beginning of your adventure.

Biographies

Dr Lynne Goodacre

As an occupational therapist I worked in the NHS and voluntary sector working with people with rheumatic conditions and advising on assistive technologies and environmental design.

I completed my PhD on a part-time basis before moving into academia where I taught postgraduate programmes, supervised PhD students and developed my own research. On leaving academia I worked at strategic level supporting the development of research capability within the NHS which is where I met Rob. Working now as a professional coach I support women as they explore a world of possibility, dare to imagine journeying towards becoming more of their magnificent self and take a step into this world.

For further info see: www.lgpersonaldevelopment.co.uk

Rob Young.

Rob trained in design, spent 13 years working in photography and 20 more writing for the UK's biggest film, TV and theatre companies, including the BBC, Channel 4, Sony, Aardman, Working Title Films and the National Theatre. He created the first online play for the Royal Shakespeare Company and has just had 100 of his poems built into the pavements of Kent. Rob now helps NHS and Social Care leaders to communicate in a way that is warm, welcoming and accessible to all. Rob was the Patron of the Love Arts Mental Health and Wellbeing Festival, the first arts festival in England to be run by an NHS Trust and the Inaugural Writer-in-Residence at Sunderland University. He is a Faculty Associate at NHS Research & Development North West and part of the Wellcome Trust team who won the inaugural Calouste Gulbenkian award, for a project in which disabled people led their own research. Rob is a practicing artist and a proud member of the Somatic Practice and Chronic Pain Network.

For further info see: robyoung.info

Orla Percy

Orla has worked in a rotational OT post gaining experience in physical and mental health roles.

Orla attended her first professional conference in June 2016. She found it a worthwhile experience as there was opportunities to meet others and get an overview of what was happening in the profession. Orla hopes this guide can remove barriers people may have in their mind and help them prepare for attending their first conference..

Twitter @orlatheOT

Catherine Gray

I am the CEO and Lead Therapist at Cup-O-T: Wellness and Therapy Services, a non-profit mental health social enterprise. Our aim is to make mental health services accessible in rural areas as early as possible. We provide Occupational Therapy, EMDR Therapy, Peer Support, training and groups in the community, in nature and from our mobile therapy van. I have

previously worked within the NHS in youth mental health, research, early intervention psychosis and perinatal mental health. Outside of work I enjoy being in nature, foraging, and spending time with friends, my husband, Joe, and cat, Frodo.

In 2017 I attended the Royal College of Occupational Therapists Annual Conference on my own, which was daunting! I tackled this by putting myself forward to be part of the conference Blog Squad – I had seen this advertised on Twitter. This made sure that I had people to meet and interact with even before getting to the conference. It has then led on to me maintaining those contacts and being involved in contributing to this Friendly Guide.

Website: <https://cup-o-t.co.uk/> Twitter: @CupOTservices Instagram: @CupOTservices

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CupOTservices>

Katie Gabriel

I am a Specialist Occupational Therapist currently working in Major Trauma. I attended my first conference when I was still a student at university. I wanted to contribute to this guide as I know I found my first conference really daunting. I would have definitely appreciated a guide such as this to help me through.