

About that last meeting you went to... did you feel healthy?

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You're at another conference, spending hour after hour, day after day sitting still in artificially lit lecture rooms, fuelling up on sad looking sandwiches and sugary biscuits, unable to find any fresh fruit or vegetables. You haven't inhaled fresh air for what feels like days, and your usual exercise routine is out the window.

If, like me, you spend a lot of time on the 'conference circuit' this will be a familiar story. So let me ask you: *How does this make you feel?*

Bright, alert and ready for a day or week of learning and networking?

Or tired, bloated and sluggish, barely able to stay awake, let alone concentrate?

I suspect the latter; far from ideal when you are supposed to be learning and engaging with colleagues.

Each year in the United States alone there are an estimated 225 million visitors to conventions, conferences, congresses and corporate/business meetings, not counting the thousands of small and medium sized meetings that regularly take place in offices. What an awful lot of sedentary behaviour and poor eating!

Meetings, conferences and work life in general are rarely conducive to healthy behaviours. Ironical really for those of us who work in public health. While looking at the 'big picture' is important, particularly when discussing policy, it doesn't hurt to look in the mirror occasionally to see what changes we can be making closer to home. Healthy meetings, however big or small, have the potential to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of participants and to increase alertness and engagement. Let's not forget what we're in meetings for in the first place!

Leading by example - starting with low hanging fruit

At the World Obesity Federation (WOF) we don't sit around complaining, and wondering "what if?". We are all about action and leading by example. We oversee a lot of meetings throughout the year, and we are currently working hard to challenge the acceptance that conferences are inevitably unhealthy, and shift the norm towards healthier meetings.

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Our International Congress on Obesity, held in Vancouver earlier this year, was a fantastic example of us trying to push boundaries and possibilities of what can make a meeting healthier.

To nourish delegates, our catering plan ensured that fruit was available in breaks, meals were fresh and healthy (including sushi and salad lunches - yum!), and we offered smaller portions of desserts. Our enticing 'hydration stations' were water coolers naturally flavoured with mint, orange or cranberry, and no sugar or sweetener - simple and beautiful!

To encourage activity and reduce sedentaryness of the meeting, standing ovations, standing space at the back of the hall, and promoting the stairs featured through the congress. We also ensured that some of our social events were active, such as morning runs in the park and yoga sessions, which people loved. Of course, we are careful to make this optional to ensure that no one felt left out or discriminated against because they did not want to or were not able to take part. The point was that healthier choices were there throughout the meeting, pushing the boundaries of what is the conference 'norm'.

Setting the standards - extending our reach

Not settling on low hanging fruit, we are also looking to improve the conference experience more widely. Those working in health promotion might think about healthy meetings, but I suspect we're a long way from them being normal. This means going directly to the source – to conference venues hosting meetings and providing catering. In 2015 we launched a **Healthy Venues Award** for conference venues, and with the support of an expert advisory committee we have developed criteria to support three pillars of Healthy Venues:

Catering: encourage a reduction in the fat, sugar and salt content of menu items, pricing healthier options at the same price point as less healthy items, shifting default products to healthier ones (for instance in lunchboxes), avoiding unhealthy promotions, and limiting unhealthy vending.

Reducing Sedentary Behaviour: promote activity, for instance ensuring that the venue provides walking routes to and around the site, shares cycle and jogging route maps for the town, avails has bike racks, has the capability to offer standing space, offers yoga and other physical activity packages, and promotes the stairs.

Workplace Health: We are also encouraging conference venues to support the health of their staff too, through team events, healthy catering and flexible breaks.

With a little bit of re-configuring, venues are realising that by becoming healthier, they also become more attractive to conference organisers and delegates.

It is still early days, but we already have two accredited venues - The Scottish Exhibition Conference Centre (SECC) in Glasgow, and the Vancouver Convention Centre (VCC), between them hosting thousands of guests, like you and me, every year. We are also working with 12 other conference centres globally and are very excited by the momentum that we are seeing.

Costing a healthy meeting - a worthwhile investment in delegate health and wellbeing

I know what you're thinking: *what does it cost to hold a healthy meeting?* The good news is it doesn't have to cost too much. Ok, so healthier catering can be a little bit more expensive, but this is one of the factors that we hope to address through the Healthy Venues Award. Even if you don't use an accredited Healthy Venue, careful selection from the menu can still mean you offer your participants a healthy meal. If you do find that you have to pay more, don't think of it as a burden but as an investment in the mental and physical health of your delegates. Keep in mind that all of the healthy meeting ideas which reduce sedentary behaviour cost nothing!

What can you do?

Next time you **organise a conference or meeting**, however big or small, why not think about

- The healthiness of catering options – *Are those biscuits necessary? What healthier food or drink could be*

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provided instead?

- Transport to and from the meeting venue - *Could you make it easier for participants to walk or cycle to get there?*
- Opportunities for movement - *Can you encourage standing ovations, and provide stretching breaks and standing space?*
- Active social programmes – *Can you break up long periods of sitting with leg-stretching outings to see the city or town?*
- Making your views count – *How can you encourage the venue to change their practices. What information can you provide to support them to be healthier?*

Next time you **attend a conference**, why not encourage colleagues to stand up to applaud, to stand at the back of the room instead of automatically sitting, and take a walk with you at break time. Why not speak to the organiser about the healthiness of the meeting, and encourage them to promote healthiness. We have information on our website that could help them to make various degrees of changes.

Looking to the future - we all have a role to play

The idea of standing ovations might seem a bit silly, but if we can transform this kind of behaviour into lasting habits we can slowly but surely start to have a positive impact on people's lives. The more we can all do to provide health promoting settings for meetings, the faster we can shift the norms to healthier behaviours in from meetings to every day of our busy lives. Who knows, you might even start looking forward to conferences even more!

About the Author

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