
The *Friendly Guide* to attending your first health professionals conference



Lynne Goodacre, Rob Young, Katie Gabriel, Orla Hughes,
Catherine Gray

1st Edition

Introduction.....	3
1. Making the best use of your time.....	4
Start planning well in advance	4
The general structure.....	4
Which sessions do I attend?	6
Do I need to book sessions?	6
On the issue of asking questions	7
What else to do?.....	7
2. Networking	8
Step one: Preparation is key.....	8
Step two: Practise the art of conversation	8
Step three: Know and challenge yourself.....	9
Step Four: Be a connector	9
Step 5: Follow up	10
3. Some important questions to ask of yourself at a conference.	10
How do I want to be?	10
What will my conference gasp be?	11
How can I speak so that people listen?	11
4. Don't forget to celebrate your gasps!.....	12
5. What happens at conference does NOT stay at conference!	14
Fanning the flames.....	14
Sharing your learning.....	15
6. Those niggling questions	17
7. A final thought	18
8. Acknowledgements.....	19
9. Biographies	19

Introduction

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

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

Your first conference experience may be a national gathering of several hundred people or it may be an international conference with many thousands. 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 like an outsider. There is so much to cram in. The pressure is on to make the most of our time. All this can feel daunting and overwhelming.

Well, we've all been in that situation which is why we've written the *Friendly Guide To Attending Your First Health Professionals Conference*.

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

We want to help you prepare beforehand and maximise the experience during and after the event.

As importantly, we want to prompt you to think 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



1. Making the best use of your time



It's your first conference, the programme is available and you realise you've got a mind boggling number of sessions to choose from. How do you choose what to do with your time?

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. It's tempting to leave the planning until the day you arrive or to tell yourself, 'I'll do it on the way to the conference'. Then you meet someone on the journey and spend the time chatting. Bang goes your planning time.

Everyone presenting, in whatever format, at a major conference is required to submit a short overview (abstract) of their presentation. These summaries are all collated into an abstract book and made available to delegates before the conference either on-line or sent out in paper format. This is your opportunity to think about the sessions you want to attend before going to conference. So, read through it and get a feel for the different sessions.

Most large conferences run concurrent sessions which means that 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. Given that the number of people admitted to sessions may be limited you don't want to be the one arriving late because you've been deciding where to go only to find the room is full and you can't get in.

The general structure

Whilst every conference is unique and will have its own structure there is a common format which most follow. This comprises keynote lectures, where all delegates come together, a series of parallel sessions where you select from a range of sessions and poster sessions providing the opportunity to discuss the content with presenters. The other key components of large conferences are exhibitions and fringe meetings.

Keynotes

Keynotes occur usually at the start and end of a conference with others being scheduled throughout the programme. They are held in the main auditorium and are billed as one of the highlights of a conference. They are the time in 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 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. In Occupational Therapy the Casson Memorial Lecture is one example, for the British Society for Rheumatology the Heberden Round is another.

Parallel Sessions

Parallel sessions are designed to give you some choice about what to attend. As we've 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 may vary. Some will comprise 3 or 4 formal presentations, others may be interactive workshops or seminars.

Poster Sessions

Poster sessions vary in how they are structured but there is usually time dedicated to poster viewing. It is 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 a note of the posters you want like to visit. Some presenters will have prepared handouts of their poster to take away but if not and you want to take a photo always ask permission first. Don't assume it is OK - it may not be.



Fringe Meetings

AGMs, advice sessions and meetings of special interest groups are also a feature of large conferences. Information about these are usually included in the abstract book. 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.

If the conference is an annual conference of a professional body or clinical forum it is likely that an annual general meeting (AGM) will be held. AGMs are formal business meetings open to members of the organisation or forum. If you are not a member you will not be able to attend. An AGM starts, 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 opportunity to engage with it and develop your understanding of how the organisation works and is governed.

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

Exhibitions

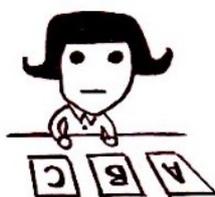
Exhibitor stands are a great place for information. Exhibitors will include commercial companies promoting products, recruitment agencies, professional bodies, special interest groups and prospective employers. There may also be voluntary organisations who provide a wealth of information to support your practice. Some of these organisations may be funders of continued professional development (CPD), fellowship awards and research, so make sure you explore what they have to offer.

Some specialist sections/forums require membership. Have a think beforehand if any of them might be of interest. Visit the stands to see how membership can aid your professional practice. Remember, 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 discounted.

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

Conference organisers always encourage delegates to visit the exhibition area and there is a good reason for this. Exhibitors pay to attend conferences and this income subsidises the delegate rate. They will only 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. This is why refreshments tend to be served in the exhibition space so that you can wander round during breaks. The exhibition is usually open for the whole of conference, but may close early on the final day. So, make sure you take time to look round and talk to exhibitors, there is a wealth of information to be found alongside, pens, post-it notes and sweets!

Which sessions do I attend?



Faced with a large choice it can be a challenge to decide which sessions to attend. Be clear about what you're looking to get from the conference. Are you aiming to learn about a specific topic? This can make life a little easier as you can choose those sessions and build around them.

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

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

If it's your first ever conference, an easy mistake to make is trying to get to too many sessions and leaving no gaps to digest information, reflect and consider what you have just learnt. By the end of three sessions in a row, your brain will be on overload. Conference days can start early and go on well into the night. Therefore, give yourself and your brain a break. Avoid going to sessions just for the sake of filling up time. Instead use the time to consolidate the knowledge that has just been imparted.

Do I need to book sessions?

This varies. Some conferences require you to book in advance, others you just turn up at the allotted time. Beware that popular sessions may be oversubscribed. If you have to book in advance, make a note of the date from which booking starts 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. It's always worth having a plan B if you cannot get into a session.

Large conferences may also 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 can vary based on the type of session it is. There can be sessions comprising of three or four shorter presentations, or longer seminars or interactive workshops. Some may require you to do a bit of background reading, some may not.

Take some method of recording notes. A lot of information will be imparted and you won't retain it all without notes. Even a couple of key pointers will help to jog your memory later.

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 the opportunity arises. If something pops into your head during the session, jot it down and ask it at the end.

During sessions you may want to use Twitter. Many conferences now have hashtags. You could tweet key points throughout the sessions. This will help you to remember key messages and to connect with others that have been to the same sessions as you, to keep the conversation going.

Most people will allow you to take photos of the slides, although it is always worth asking in advance. If a presenter asks you not to take pictures respect their request. There will be a reason.

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 whether the questions are to be asked after each presentation 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. It can be nerve-wracking, especially in larger conferences where you may have to use a microphone. Muster your courage the majority of people will be just as nervous. Valuable information can be gained from questions and you will be helping other people.

However, if you are too nervous at the time, or the time for questions is cut short before you have a chance to ask, you may still have the opportunity to talk to the presenter at the end of the session. If they're 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?

Take some time out for yourself, to reflect on everything you have been learning. It is great to be fully involved, but you need to have a bit of time to yourself to really consider everything.

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

2. Networking



Social interaction can be daunting, especially at a professional event where you may feel like an imposter. When you imagine walking into your first conference what comes to 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've already taken your first step to building your networks - you are there! A conference is the perfect way to start networking as you are meeting people while learning together. This shared purpose gives ample opportunity for conversation to take place and connections to be made. However, we would urge you not to leave networking to chance. Build some intention around it. Here are some steps to networking smarter.

Step one: Preparation is key

It's helpful to understand the distinction between general **networking**, *interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts* and **strategic networking**, *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 presenting on a topic relevant to your dissertation, or there may be a specific employer or funding body who has an exhibitors stand. In previous sections we have highlighted the importance of looking through the abstract book 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 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 and this is a great opportunity to start your networking. You will no longer be 'Billy no mates' as you will have met other people.

Consider in advance how people are going to keep in touch with you after the conference. Are you going to bring business cards or ask people for their Twitter handle? 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.

Step two: Practise the art of conversation

Having a conversation certainly isn't 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 you 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. Nothing says, 'don't talk to me' more than this.
- Do you have a tendency to talk too much? Networking 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 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? Pay attention, we soon pick up when someone isn't listening to us.
- Ask compelling questions. Many hold back from starting a conversation due to the fear that it could dry up into an awkward silence. If you are concerned about this have some prepared questions, your 'get out of jail' questions. Having something to fall back on will give some reassurance when stepping into the unknown.

If you are concerned about having conversations with new people remember you're at the same conference and that in itself is a good topic for conversation, 'What are you learning?' 'What great sessions have you been to?' can 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. 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).

Step three: Know and challenge yourself

Are you an extrovert or introvert? 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're not, there's nothing worse or more exhausting. Have a think about how you prefer to communicate and socialise 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

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. It is so easy, when you get back into your normal routine, to not follow-up. Make contact as soon as possible. You don't want to be a distant memory when they read your email or receive an invitation to connect on social media.

3. Some important questions to ask of yourself at a conference.

How do I want to be?



Conferences are a fantastic way of breathing life back into us, energising and connecting us with our community. 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.

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, '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. 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 moments 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 introduces 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 more courageous space.

So here's another question to think about -

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

Maybe your gasp will be giving a presentation. But if you're not what is something that you can 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 spending three days staying in 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. 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, with 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. 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 do?

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 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 in the queue for lunch. 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 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. Julian Treasure is an engaging speaker well worth sparing 10 minutes of your time to listen to.

4. Don't forget to celebrate your gasps!

So much happens around a conference. They are busy times. 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,"
- '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'

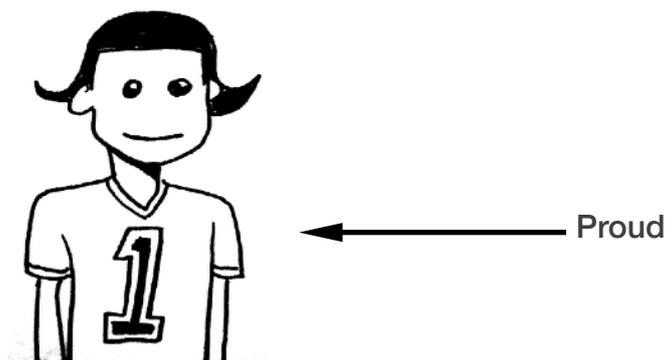
AND don't forget to give as much attention to the 'what went well'.

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

It may be the first time you have 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. 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.



5. What happens at conference does NOT stay at conference!

Fanning the flames

A question posed by Julia Scott, Chief Exec of Royal College of Occupational Therapists, during the closing session of the 2017 annual conference was how to retain the energy and buzz of conference when we get back to work. 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 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 so 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 then it's your responsibility to take back what you've learnt and make use of it, especially if you've received funding to go. In some instances feeding back 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. 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 style 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...

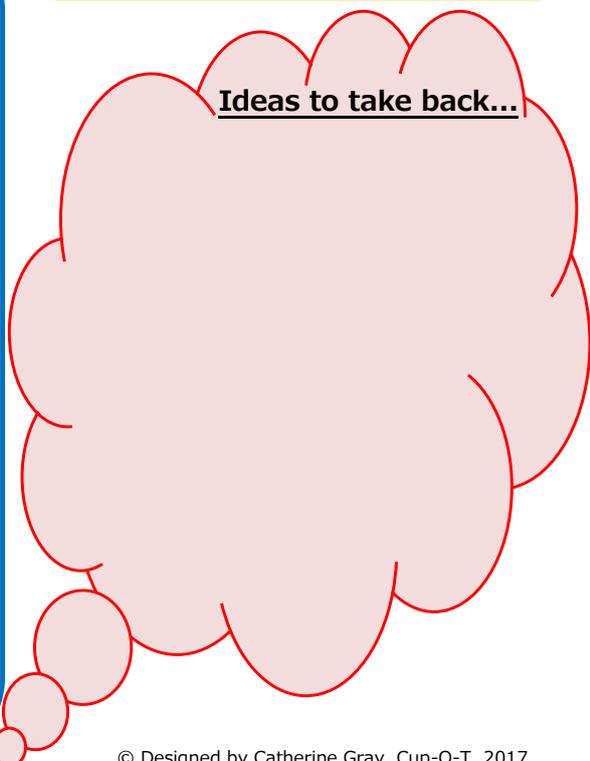


• Blog and tweet during the conference. Who says you have to wait until you're back in the office or at the next team meeting before you have to feedback? Live interaction is a huge part of conferences now. Why not use the conference hashtag and one of your own so that your colleagues can follow live too e.g. #”myworkplace”. 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 at the Conference 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.**
- Keep a note of discussions you've had with other delegates, not just about the sessions you attended.
- Write down a summary of each session you attend. This can either be 5 bullet points per session, or use this handy sheet on the next page 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 write a quick summary/blog/diary entry or tweet with the conference hashtag. But do not use the whole break or lunch 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 give a formal 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. Bring it alive with photos or even video clips if they are accessible from the conference.
- Make it as enjoyable as you found the conference. 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 presentation after, that way you're not bombarding people with too much information.

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.

<u>Conference/Event:</u>		<u>Session Date and Time:</u>	
<u>Title of Session:</u>		<u>Presenter details:</u>	
		Name:	
		Email:	
		Workplace:	
<u>Questions / Thoughts:</u>			
Thoughts during the session:			
Questions leading off other's comments:			
After thoughts:			
			
© Designed by Catherine Gray, Cup-O-T, 2017			
<u>Reflections</u>			
For Me	For My Profession	For My Team	

6. Those niggling questions

Whenever we are going 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 all 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 at a conference 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 day the conference starts.

Will there be a conference bag?

Most large conferences provide you with a conference bag at registration. These usually contains the conference 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 are going to use the conference bag have some way of identifying your bag. Everyone at conference 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 with your name on it. 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 for using these. This may not be the case if the conference is held in a smaller venue. Check with the organisers if you think you may need somewhere 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 or 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 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 layers are the order of the day.

A word about footwear. If you're attending a large conference you will 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 but give it some thought before the conference starts. Scraps of paper aren't the best - have a notebook.

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.

7. 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.

8. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Rob Molloy for provide us with feedback as this resource came into being.

9. Biographies

Dr Lynne Goodacre

As an Occupational Therapist I have 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 health professionals undertaking 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 people as they explore a world of possibility, dare to imagine journeying towards becoming more of their magnificent self and taking a step into this world.

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

Rob Young.

In the 1990's, I was hit by a car. To pass the time while recovering, I wrote a play and put it on with my compensation. It got a kind review and launched a career that I'd never planned.

For the past 20 years, I have earned my living being commissioned to write for the UK's biggest film, TV and theatre companies, including the BBC, Channel 4, Sony, Aardman, Working Title and The National Theatre. I wrote the first online play for the Royal Shakespeare Company and Google that trended 4th in the world, just above 'cats do the silliest things'. Someone once described me as, 'the most successful writer who nobody's ever heard of'.

I am happy with that. I am not the type who 'tap dances for attention' and would rather do something 'good'. I found myself drawn to healthcare, the place where it all started. I wrote a play about Proteus Syndrome, a pilot about surgery and became Writer-in-Residence at NHS Research & Development NW. It was there that Lynne and I created The Researcher Magazine, a groundbreaking NHS publication, curated by clinicians, that is read in 45 countries. We have been friends ever since.

When asked to sum my career up in 4 syllables, I used to say, 'I make things bloom'. I've now replaced that with, 'How can I help?'

For further info see: robyoung.info

Orla Hughes

I am an MSc Occupational Therapy student at Teesside University, Middlesbrough. I enjoy playing ukulele, singing in a choir, blogging, travelling, hiking, and photography. I aspire to work as an occupational therapist in the mental health sector when I graduate in early 2019.

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

Website orlahughes.com Twitter [@orlatheOT](https://twitter.com/orlatheOT)

Catherine Gray

I have spent the majority of my professional life as an Occupational Therapist working in young people's mental health and early intervention psychosis. I currently work as a Research Practitioner in Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust and I am the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Cup-O-T: Wellness and Therapy Services. Cup-O-T is a social enterprise which delivers mental wellness support to those living in rural Norfolk who are unable to access statutory services. Outside of work I enjoy foraging, anything to do with Harry Potter, origami and spending time with 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: www.cup-o-t.co.uk

Twitter: [@CupOTservices](https://twitter.com/CupOTservices)

Katie Gabriel

I am a BSc Occupational Therapy student at the University of Cumbria, due to graduate in July 2018. I have interests in both mental health and paediatrics and am hoping to gain a job in one of these areas when I qualify.

When I attended my first conference in 2016 as a 1st year undergraduate I made lots of mistakes, such as not preparing. After my first experience at a conference, I have been able to get more involved in a variety of conferences mainly because I now understand what will happen and what to expect. A guide like this would have been really helpful for me, so I definitely didn't want to pass up this opportunity to be involved! Conferences can be daunting experiences, but also really valuable for continued professional development and I would recommend everyone to get involved with them as much as possible.

Twitter: [@Katie_Next](https://twitter.com/@Katie_Next)