

Conference Handbook

Guidelines for Mental Wellness at Conferences

Created by OSMI



KubeCon



CloudNativeCon

North America 2019



OSMI Conference Handbook

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Introduction

We at Open Sourcing Mental Illness (OSMI) and the Cloud Native Computing Foundation are dedicated to promoting health and well-being at tech conferences. We have collected the information in this guide to benefit those who are planning to attend, speak at, or work at KubeCon + CloudNativeCon North America 2019.

While the main focus of this guide will be on maintaining mental health, there will be some physical health components as the two often go hand in hand when in a social setting.

Additionally, these tips and guidelines may not be applicable to everyone universally, but can be used as a reference to help improve the conference experience, especially for anyone who finds the social constructs and time frames of a conference to be a bit overwhelming.

Take care of yourself, take care of your community, and enjoy KubeCon + CloudNativeCon North America 2019!

Managing Your Own Well-being

While you will find tips later in this guide about how to help other people at KubeCon + CloudNativeCon North America 2019, you must first start with yourself. Below you will find useful information to make your conference experience more enjoyable.

Finding Important Locations

Knowing the layout of the venue and the location of key rooms and facilities can help make the conference experience much more comfortable and relaxing.

Venue Information

San Diego Convention Center 111 W Harbor Dr, San Diego, CA 92101, United States <https://visitsandiego.com/>¹

The San Diego Convention Center is located in the Marina District with incredible panoramic views of San Diego Bay.

If you are arriving by plane or train, the San Diego Convention Center is located less than one mile from the Amtrak Station and three miles from San Diego International Airport: <https://www.san.org/>²

The San Diego Trolley has two stops directly in front of the convention center at Harbor Drive/First Avenue and Harbor Drive/Fifth Avenue: <https://www.sdmts.com/schedules-real-time>³

Some key locations you may want to find are:

- Badge Pick-up: Lobby AB
- Keynote: Exhibit Halls A + B
- Sponsor Showcase: Sails Pavilion + Ballroom 6AB
- Breakouts: Various Rooms on Mezzanine + Upper Levels
- Additional Meal Seating: Exhibit Hall C
- Quiet Room: Room 13
- Nursing Room: Workroom 20CC off Ballroom 20 Lobby
- Media Lounge: Room 8
- Speaker Lounge: Room 4
- First Aid: Box Office on Lower Level near Badge Pick-up
- The Open Sourcing Mental Illness (OSMI) Booth: Lounge 4 by Ballroom 20CD

Quiet Room

Location: Room 13 All attendees may feel free to use the Quiet Room as needed. It is a physical space where conversation and interaction are not allowed, where attendees can go if for any reason they don't want to interact with other attendees at that time.

¹<https://visitsandiego.com/>

²<https://www.san.org/>

³<https://www.sdmts.com/schedules-real-time>

Know How to Get Help

Conferences are great places for learning and networking, but at some point, you may need something, and it's really important to know where you can go to get what you need.

Conference Staff

Your first point of contact for getting what you need is the conference staff and organizers. You can find staff at the badge pick-up or support desk in Lobby AB of the San Diego Center or at the info desks throughout the venue. Organizers and staff can help you find conference locations and timing information.

They can also help you find things near the conference as well if you are not familiar with the area. The organizers and staff are also there to make sure you are safe, so if anything happens that is inappropriate or makes you feel unsafe, find one of them as soon as you are able so that you can report it. Please review the CNCF official Code of Conduct below.

Code of Conduct

The CNCF has a [Code of Conduct](#)⁴ in place. A Code of Conduct is a document outlining what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior at an event as well as the consequences for inappropriate behavior. It will also contain instructions for how to report Code of Conduct violations and how the reports will be handled.

Emergency Services

In case of an emergency, it is useful to know the local emergency numbers. Police, fire and ambulance services can all be accessed by dialing 911.

Crisis Services

Your first contact in an emergency should be 911. If you are not sure if it is an emergency, you can contact a crisis line for help. There are many international crisis help centers available. Please visit

⁴<https://events19.linuxfoundation.org/events/kubecon-cloudnativecon-north-america-2019/attend/code-of-conduct/>

Wikipedia's List of Suicide Crisis Lines⁵, Suicide.org's List of International Suicide Hotlines⁶, and The International Bipolar Foundation's List of International Suicide Hotlines⁷ to find one in your country or one that speaks your language. Even though they are labeled as suicide crisis lines, they are available to help with any mental health crisis.

OSMI Booth

You are encouraged to stop by the OSMI booth in Lounge 4 by Ballroom 20CD which will be staffed by volunteers from CNCF member companies and will be open during the normal sponsor hours. OSMI booth staff are on hand to chat and listen, to answer any questions you might have, and to point you in the right direction if they are unable to meet your needs.

OSMI Resources

The Open Sourcing Mental Illness (OSMI) website has a Resources section with links and information on many crisis and help lines as well as organizations that provide education and training on mental health topics. The Resources section also contains links to handbooks to help employers and employees know their rights and create a more welcoming and supportive work environment for everyone. Visit <https://osmihelp.org>⁸ and click on "Resources".

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_suicide_crisis_lines

⁶<http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html>

⁷<https://ibpf.org/resource/list-international-suicide-hotlines>

⁸<https://osmihelp.org>

Know Your Limits While Challenging Yourself

It's important to know what you can handle and what will make you uncomfortable. While you are at the conference, make sure you respect your limits to keep yourself in a healthy state. However, don't let your insecurities mask themselves as limits. Make sure you challenge yourself to meet new people, learn new things, and step outside your comfort zone when and where you feel safe doing so.

Your Limits Can Change

When you are in your regular routine, you may be fine being social, sitting through meetings, or talking shop with potential clients. At a conference, be aware that your ability to do these things may change because dealing with a new environment eats up some of the resources you normally use to handle these other activities.

Recharge and Then Get Back To It

While it is good to be a part of the conference talks and social events, don't feel like you have to see and/or be at everything. It is perfectly acceptable to skip a block of talks to take an hour or two to decompress in your hotel room or in a quiet space. This will give you a chance to process what you have learned and rest a bit before heading back out to the conference again. You will learn more and be better equipped to make the most of the conference if you take breaks.

Additionally, one of the most valuable places in a conference is the area where attendees gather when they are not in talks, commonly known as the "hallway track". The conversations that happen here can lead to more personalized discoveries because you can ask questions about your specific situations and technologies. This is also a great place to grow your network so you have more people to learn from even after you leave the conference.

Eat!

One of the first things to go to the wayside, whether you are a speaker, attendee, sponsor, volunteer, or organizer is food. “I’ll grab something later” or “I don’t have time for a meal” is a sure path to physical illness and a general inability to function at your highest level.

Eat Proper Meals

Many people think they might be able to get away with a quick bag of crisps or a little snack and be fine, others may try a liquid diet - coffee and water, coffee and water. Neither of these would be the way we eat at home or in the office, why would you eat that way at conference?

If you are a three meal a day person at home, that shouldn’t change when at an event. It is up to to determine what calories and food your body needs.

Times of meals may change, especially if the event isn’t in your timezone, you should adjust to make sure you get the nutrition you need.

Know Your Needs

No one knows better than you what your body can and cannot have. Whether it’s a food allergy, a gluten intolerance, a cultural belief - you are probably more aware of your dietary needs than anyone else.

That said, it means it is your responsibility to let people know. If you have a dietary need, best to let organizers know and the process for that is to state that in the registration process of the event. If you have already stated your dietary preferences including Kosher and Halal meals during the registration process of KubeCon + CloudNativeCon North America 2019, it will be accounted for.

Step Away

Since many events are trying to cater to many, the food options sometimes fall short. Consider taking a conference break and finding somewhere nearby to grab food. This way you have more control over the menu, you can use the time to catch up on work, or chat with friends on topics not related to the conference.

This a perfect way to take a break and see a little of the area the event is being held in. Make sure to manage your time, though, and return before missing something you planned to take in at the conference.

Stay Hydrated

Coffee and soda are wonderful and delicious. They are not, however, water. Water is what your body craves constantly. It helps maintain physical homeostasis, helps your immune system, and is almost always readily available. Consider bringing a reusable water bottle to refill as needed.

Conclusion

Part of your physical well being is keeping that machine you call a body running, and that takes fuel. Be sure to eat meals, maintain healthy eating habits if possible, and drink water. Doing these things will help you to sustain a better attitude and better physical feeling during any event.

Get Sleep

In the world of conference attendance, sponsoring, speaking, and organizing there is something that bleeds over from the world of being a developer: sleep, or lack thereof. Similar to hitting “the zone” while developing a project and attempting to push on without sleep, conference goers often give in to the fear of missing out (also known as FOMO) by skimping on sleep to attend early talks, show up at after parties or events, or attending a dinner with fellow conference goers.

While it is important to maintain connections in the community, it should never be done at the expense of one’s physical and mental well-being. Maintaining a manageable schedule is key to enjoying your time at a conference, as much as any activities you might participate in.

Know Your Needs

Long before you get to the conference, check the schedule of events. While it’s impossible to plan for everything, at the very least you can be in the know on what is likely to happen when. If you are the type of person who needs eight hours of sleep to be comfortable and rested, don’t let the conference change that schedule. Make sure you are getting the amount of sleep your body is used to, and don’t convince yourself less sleep is acceptable.

If this means missing out or leaving early from events, better to do so than to risk feeling rundown and missing more moving forward. Take care of your sleep so your body will take care of you.

Be Aware

Part of getting the sleep you need is being comfortable and knowing your surroundings or the situations you may find yourself in. Chances are, if you are traveling for a conference, you will be staying in a hotel or some other environment that is not your home.

If you are in a hotel, take some time when you first arrive to get acclimated. If you have allergies, consider requesting non-feather pillow and comforters. Is it tough to get up in the morning and you rely on a partner, significant other, or roommate to help you wake up? Take advantage of the wake-up call service most hotels offer.

Knowing where you are in relation to the conference event is also important. If you arrive early, take a look or even travel to the venue to see what time you’ll need in the morning to get there. Not only does this help with planning, it lowers your anxiety and helps to ensure better sleep not worrying about the “getting there” aspect.

Take a Break, Take a Nap

Going to a conference is more social interaction than most people would expect for any given day. This can be exhausting even for the most extroverted. Don't let that get you down! It's okay to take breaks or even a nap.

If you are lucky and you're in a hotel next to the conference venue, there is no shame in running back to your room to grab a thirty minute power nap or even a full on nap. Do not feel like you are abandoning the conference or the community - we all want you at your best - and that means your most well rested too!

Work as a Team

It could be you are there with coworkers, especially if you are speaking or your company or organization is sponsoring. This makes sleep management a little easier - sleep as a team!!

If you have an evening event, but also an early morning booth duty session, make sure your team is covered. There's no need for everyone to be at every part of everything. Make sure some people are at the event and the others are sleeping so they can be at the booth the next morning.

When interacting with conference goers, the more well rested you are, the easier it will be to process everything going on with the presentations, the sponsor booths, and the community.

Conclusion

Sleep is the key to being able to take in all you can at a conference. With planning, some forethought, and help from friends and coworkers, you should be able to have the best experience without running your battery so low that it takes days to recover.

Taking Breaks

Whether a small community conference, a giant corporate event, or a massive international event, conferences mean a great deal of social interaction. Even for people who thrive in this environment, it's difficult to process everything when you are moving from interaction to interaction, conversation to conversation, and circle of friends to circle of friends.

The context switching alone is mind blowing! Then there are the people who you have varying levels of familiarity with. It's enough to make anyone feel overwhelmed.

Taking breaks or some personal time can help. Whether this means stepping away into a quiet corner or running to your hotel for a quick nap, taking a break throughout the day, away from people, will enhance your conference experience and your mental and physical well-being.

Remember the Sun

Fortunately, there's a very strong chance that the weather will be fantastic throughout the conference. But even if there are some cloudy days, there is still value in natural light. Researchers have found natural light to help with feelings of depression associated with Seasonal Affective Disorder. Getting a bit of sun (or at least natural, non-artificial light) can help you.

So, take a walk outside...carefully. Make sure you are familiar with the area and know how to get back. This will give you a nice break from the constant social interaction and give your brain some time to process all you've been seeing in sessions and conversations.

Going It Alone

Part of the point of these breaks is to mitigate the constant flow of interaction inherent in conversations and sessions at the conference. It's okay to take a personal moment. As an attendee, it is not reasonable to expect you will attend every session, be at every workshop and every evening event.

Getting away from people for a bit to process what you are learning and sharing is a good way to give context to what you are taking in.

Disengage

One of the purposes of taking a break is to let go of everything going on around you for a few moments. If this means heading off alone to jump on social media to check what's going on at the conference, it will likely not give you the break you are looking for.

If anything, you may feel more stressed or anxious after checking Twitter while trying to take a break. Try to disengage fully for a short while.

Conclusion

Put the phone down, walk away, take a break. Giving yourself time to rest and recuperate will help you feel more calm and more able to participate in the conference.

Keeping it Clean

We've mentioned a few times how conferences and events can lead to more interaction than one is accustomed to. This can mean many cultural norms involving physical contact are observed, from handshakes to hugs to other appropriate forms of contact.

Your mental well-being is closely-tied to your physical well-being and working against the pathogens and illnesses spread at events can help decrease the chances that feeling physically ill will not make it more difficult for you to maintain your mental health. Beyond that, maintaining good personal hygiene can have a positive impact on your mental health, causing less stress during social interactions and improving your mental state through self-care.

Wash Those Hands

The number one step to avoiding picking up "conference flu" is to wash your hands. Research has found the number of dirt and germs that can be passed through simple hand contact is significant. Washing one's hands often can prevent a multitude of issues and help you prevent passing anything on to others.

Hand sanitizer can be used in a pinch, but it is a stop gap. Using water and soap is the best method to ensure your hands are clean. Don't skimp on the soap and make sure to dry your hands when you are finished.

General Hygiene

Keeping clean isn't just for hands! Often, events and conferences take place with many people milling about and interacting. To ensure the environment is pleasant, make sure to maintain good hygiene habits.

It's not always easy to maintain the environment at a venue. It can be hot or cold, it could make you sweaty one minute, then cold the next. If you are someone who perspires frequently, consider stepping away to clean up or carrying some personal care products, so you will have one less thing to worry about.

Conclusion

Cleanliness leads to a healthier environment. While we can't be sure everyone we shake hands or interact with is clean, we can make sure we are and, in so doing, we can be sure we aren't bringing with us any event illnesses when we leave.

Helping Others to Remain Well

Hopefully you'll be enjoying yourself during the conference and might even have some spare energy left over to help others. Here are a few pointers on how you can do that.

Be Kind

Everyone at a conference is outside of their normal environment, and they are all under more stress than normal. When you interact with other people, be compassionate. Remember that you do not know what they went through to get to the conference, what they are dealing with outside of the conference, or even what they are dealing with at the conference. Be extra kind to those around you. A little extra patience can go a long way in telling someone thank you for making the effort to attend the event or thank you for all of your hard work.

Polite Speech

At a conference, you have people from all different walks of life - different ages, different races, different economic status, different backgrounds, different religions, different upbringings. Keeping your speech polite can help everyone feel included. Where you are from, swear words or slang words may be common place and expected, but that may not be the case for others. By using polite speech, you can help everyone feel comfortable and welcomed at the event.

How Are You Doing?

“How are you doing?” These four simple words can have a large impact on someone struggling with a mental health issue. It shows that you notice that person and are interested in their well-being. Many times, people will simply respond with “Fine.” If you feel like someone is not being forthcoming with their answer, you can follow up with another question to try to get beyond the standard, polite responses. Use a question that is more action focused, like “Is there anything you need?”, “Are all of your needs being met?”, or “Is there anything I can help you find?”

This begins to build a relationship and opens the door for them to ask you for help or let you know that something isn’t going well. Even if they don’t need anything at the moment, if they need something in the future, they will remember that you were willing to help them, and it will be easier for them to approach you in the future.

The Pac-man Rule - Making Conversations Inclusive

When you walk into a conference, it can take you back to your childhood days of trying to find a place to fit in. People may have come with co-workers and already know people in the room to talk to. Some are attending solo and may not know anyone in the room. When you are having a conversation, you can make it easy for a new person to join your conversation by leaving a gap in your circle. This is referred to as The Pac-man Rule as the shape of your group should resemble a circle with a piece missing, like the shape of the classic video game character.

Leaving an opening like this makes it simple for someone walking by to pause and instantly join your group. They do not have to interrupt the conversation to join your group, and they won't have to ask anyone to move so they can join your group. They can join your group without a word.

Once someone has filled the gap in your Pac-man shaped circle, take a step back and to one side to widen the circle and form a new gap to welcome another person.

Signs of Distress

Even though you may not know most of the people you come into contact with at the conference, you can still keep an eye out for signs of a mental health issue. While distress can manifest in different ways for different people, the following are a few common signs that someone may be struggling with a mental health issue.

Excessive Feelings or Mood Swings

Keep an eye out for anyone feeling very strong emotions that are more than the current situation would normally warrant. These often manifest as over-the-top feelings of fear, sadness, or worry. Sometimes they display as disproportionate irritability and anger, but they could also be feelings that are much more happy and euphoric than they should be. In addition, watch for mood swings that change too quickly from one extreme to another. Extreme emotions of any kind can be a sign that someone is in distress.

Confusion

Conferences and large crowds can be overwhelming for even the most social of people, but keep an eye out for anyone who seems to be having trouble focusing or concentrating. Watch for signs of confusion, forgetting things that were just said, or anyone who is having trouble following a conversation. At the least, this is a sign of exhaustion. At the worst, they could be having a mental health crisis. In either case, they need someone to check in with them and see if they need anything.

Unexplained Physical Ailments

While a long day at a conference can reasonably lead to a headache, watch for anyone who seems to have unexplained ailments, especially ongoing aches and pains without cause.

Response Do's and Do Not's

If you see or recognize that someone is struggling with a mental health issue, here are some things you should do or should not do to help them:

- Do ask the person if they are alright and if they need anything.

- **Do not** tell them to “Snap out of it.” or “Get over it.”
- **Do** call a medical professional or emergency services if you are at all worried that this person may need medical attention or may be in danger of harming themselves or others.
- **Do not** hesitate to call emergency services if someone is in danger.
- **Do** tell a conference staff member what you have noticed. If you know someone who is close to the person in distress, it is good to let them know as well so they can help support the person.
- **Do not** post the information to social media or discuss it with the other conference attendees.
- **Do** check in with them again later to see if things have improved or if there is anything they need now.
- **Do not** give them a treatment plan to follow. Ask them what they need, but do not tell them what they need to do.
- **Do** encourage them to get help from a medical professional.
- **Do not** tell the person what mental health issue you think they have or attempt to give the person a mental health diagnosis. This information should only be given to them by a medical health professional.

Above all else, let them know that someone cares and is willing to help them if they need it.