



MENTAL HEALTH AND MEETINGS

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You may have noticed something new lately about in-person events:

They make you feel a whole lot better.



And that's no accident. Meeting professionals and participants alike are finding that gathering face-to-face brings mental health and wellness benefits they had all but forgotten about during 2020 and 2021.

"There's something special about being in person," says meeting scientist Joe Allen, a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at University of Utah Health, the director of the Center for Meeting Effectiveness in Salt Lake City and the author of the books *Suddenly Virtual* and *Suddenly Hybrid*. "Humans and humanity will not continue to exist if we don't have interpersonal interactions. It's as simple as that."

Why is getting together so good for our mental health and wellbeing? The reason, Allen says, is a phenomenon known as contagion, in which our moods rub off on others in the room. If one person at a meeting is full of energy and enthusiasm, for instance, that vibe can spread to the larger group. Attendees experience more psychological stimulation when they are in the same room than when they join from different physical locations, Allen says.

Positive contagion can bring about a state that leads to higher performance, which, in turn, often makes us feel better. Research on distributed teams shows that when team members come together occasionally, even for short periods of time, they perform better than teams that don't, Allen notes. "You're feeding off each other," he says.

Meeting new people benefits our wellbeing, too. People's networks shrunk by 16 percent, on average, during the pandemic, according to recent [research](#) by Marissa King and Balázs Kovács, professors of organizational behavior at the

Yale School of Management. They found that maintaining connection to the "outer rings" of our social circles is critical to wellbeing (as well as innovation, creativity and problem solving).

There are also physiological perks from coming together. [Research](#) on mice, conducted at Imperial College, shows that when they are isolated, dopamine neurons send out signals that encourage them to seek out healthy interaction. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that affects mood and emotion. In humans, it contributes to feeling alert, focused, motivated and happy. Joining a conference has mood-boosting properties.

The positive effects of a well-run meeting can extend beyond the actual event. When workers feel great at meetings, it affects their overall job satisfaction, according to [research](#) published on APA PsychNet, with researchers concluding that "meeting satisfaction is a distinct facet of job satisfaction." That is particularly true when workers are expected to spend a lot of time in meetings, the study found.

The good news is that many companies and organizations are prioritizing team members' mental health and wellbeing to combat the Great Resignation, quiet quitting and other post-pandemic trends. Among Gen Z alone, 42 percent say they have a diagnosed mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression, according to an [analysis](#) by Harmony Healthcare IT.

Among U.S. employers, 88 percent have started implementing measures to address the mental health of their workforce, according to a [survey](#) conducted by Willis Towers Watson. Sixty-seven percent plan to make mental health and

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emotional wellbeing programs one of their top three priorities for the next three years. And, the survey found, the number of employers who plan to offer mental health days could triple from 9 percent to 30 percent in the next two years.

Against this backdrop, many leaders now feel it is imperative to bring their people together in person or in hybrid meetings. However, after three years of semi-hibernation, many people are rusty at business socializing—and find that, even as they look forward to reconnecting, it can be unexpectedly stressful to jump back in. “It’s not something we expected to be so difficult after hiding in our houses,” Allen says.

That’s where meeting organizers and strategists come in. By prioritizing attendees’ wellness and mental health, many are finding they can play an important role in easing the transition back to in-person work. Some are concentrating on moving up the pyramid in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, according to Nancy Snowden, former lead manager, educational experiences for MPI.

The hierarchy, a concept pioneered by psychologist Abraham Maslow, stresses that every human being has common needs, such as food and shelter. These reside at the base of the pyramid. Once we have these things covered, we can move up the pyramid to loftier needs that make life more pleasurable and fulfilling, such as belonging and love, esteem, cognitive stimulation, aesthetic pleasure, self-actualization and at the very top, transcendence.

“As professionals, we are pretty good at meeting people’s physical needs, such as food and shelter,” says Snowden. However, in today’s business environment that may not be enough. “During the pandemic, we saw that people had a greater need for psychological safety: ‘Do I feel safe in my own head, given the current circumstances in the world?’” says Snowden. “We had to level up on that need.”

As a result, meeting organizers and planners are shifting their attention to desires such as belonging. “These are esoteric, high-level truths that all human beings are predisposed to work toward,” says Snowden. “Wellness is a catalyst for that. How do events, in the way we design them, allow people to feel psychologically safe and also help participants find community and belonging? How do we help create a greater sense of intelligence and self-esteem?”

This goes beyond a commoditized approach to wellness, based on buying things like aromatherapy oils. Meeting professionals are gravitating to an integrative approach, where wellness and mental health are baked into every aspect of a gathering, according to Snowden. “What we don’t want in an event space is to continue to churn out



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freestanding commodities people can partake in or not,” Snowden says. “That doesn’t help create transformational spaces.”

In this new environment, a few nods to wellness—like stretching before every session, putting salads on the lunch menu or adding a meditation room to a trade show floor—aren’t enough, even if adding them allows the meeting organizers to say that they’ve prioritized wellness. “That’s like thinking having a Peloton in my house means I’m more fit,” Snowden says. “When I see that, it means the event design was created around what attendees said people need. It’s around what helps people best check that box.”

An integrative approach to wellness may be so subtle that attendees barely notice it. For instance, many organizers are now prioritizing attendees’ financial wellness, in an atmosphere where higher costs and inflation may determine who can afford to attend a meeting or event and the stress, or lack thereof, that comes with attending it, Snowden says.

“We usually think financial wellness relates to the cost of an event overall,” Snowden adds. However, there are other considerations. “Are you providing scholarships? Are you providing benefactor opportunities? Are there opportunities for potential attendees to cost-save in terms of rooms and travel costs? Is there a tiered pricing structure, so it is incrementally more expensive, versus being one price? You can make a demonstrable difference in how someone is able to choose to participate. Creating an event that impacts their ability to be financially well impacts their financial wellness. We all know the stress of, ‘How am I going to pay for this?’”

Breaking Bread and Enhancing Wellness



No matter where a meeting takes place, a focus on wellness and mental health should touch every aspect of the gathering. A good place to start is food and beverage.

What attendees eat can have a big effect on their moods and mental health, elevating how they feel if the choices support their health or leave them feeling depressed or anxious. Meeting professionals have an opportunity to set the tone when they first select a locale. Cities like Virginia Beach—which has a legendary culinary scene and many small, privately-owned restaurants serving fresh, local fare—can make this easier.

Start by seeking out [local dining guides](#) like the one at [visitvirginiabeach.com](https://www.visitvirginiabeach.com), which showcase popular culinary landmarks. In Virginia Beach, these include Bay Local Eatery, which sources its seafood from the Chesapeake Bay’ Bro’s Fish Tacos, and Becca Restaurant & Garden at the Cavalier, known for mouth-watering dishes made from the catches of the day.

Although it sometimes costs a bit more to eat healthy, it can have powerful results. There are many studies showing the effect on food and mental health. One [2020 study](#)

When you have a greater sense of psychological choice, it improves wellness from within.

published in *TheBMJ*, found that healthy eating patterns, such as those embodied in the Mediterranean diet, are associated with better mental health than a typical Western diet—and that what people eat can affect their glycemic levels, immune activation and gut microbes, all of which impact mood. The flip side of this is that high-fat and high-sugar diets and alcohol intake reduce a process known as neurogenesis that helps prevent depression, according to another [study](#). And yet another [study](#) shows that eating a healthy, anti-inflammatory diet can help prevent depression.

Plant-based eating can help attendees feel great throughout a meeting, whether they prefer the Mediterranean diet, Paleo eating, vegan dining or another way of nourishing themselves. One idea Snowden has seen catching on: Instead of having attendees “opt in” to vegetarian meals, some meeting organizers are asking them if they want to opt in to meat. “How do you create norms around what you value?” Snowden asks.

Sourcing locally and responsibly can also contribute to better moods among attendees, reducing some worries they have about potentially contributing to the climate crisis. “Engaging with products that are environmentally conscious and sustainably sourced contributes to the bigger wellness picture,” Snowden says.

Meeting organizers and venues don’t have to do the detective work to evaluate food choices on their own. Virginia Beach Convention Center’s catering service, for instance, participates in Sensible Seafood, a program that allows organizers to incorporate sustainable seafood into the

dining experience. It offers information on how the seafood is fished or farmed, and whether it is well-managed and abundant at the moment.

The way a meal is served can also enhance the experience for attendees, from a mental health and wellness perspective. Offering options that take into account the fact that attendance will include people who are introverts, extraverts and neurodiverse is a good place to begin.

“Instead of saying you have an hour and a half for lunch, what if you said ‘You’ve got three hours?’” Snowden asks. “You can take your food, eat in your room and recharge. Or you can choose to sit at a table where other people want to have a conversation—or sit at a table where there is no talking, where people just want the presence of others.” The result is less stress and a greater sense of belonging. “When you have a greater sense of psychological choice, it improves wellness from within,” Snowden says.

Building Wellness into the Agenda



How you break up the day at a meeting can also contribute to attendees wellness.

Trying to cram multiple sessions into every single hour may seem like it is creating value but it can be overwhelming

Incorporating nature into your design helps promote nature.

and create stress. “Be thoughtful and mindful,” Snowden advises. “Vary your session formats and content.” For instance, instead of opting only for seminars, consider providing opportunities for participant-driven discussion. Even very short breaks between meetings can reduce brain stress, according to [research](#) by Microsoft.

Not all of the breaks need to take place inside the convention hall or hotel. At MPI’s WEC San Francisco event, participant-driven discussions and campfires were a hit, contributing to the social wellness of the event, Snowden notes. “What a refreshing change of pace from being talked to for an hour. There is a satisfaction from being able to share and learn from others.”

The same holds true for physical activity breaks. It’s not just about adding events like a fun run or yoga class. A wellness-supporting meeting or event will keep attendees’ physical wellbeing top of mind at every juncture. “It may mean that some of your educational sessions use unique seating that allows people to expel kinesthetic energy,” Snowden says.

Incorporating Nature



Weaving nature into meeting design can also enhance attendees’ mental health—while advancing your sustainability goals. “Incorporating nature into your design helps promote

nature,” Snowden says.

Locations like Virginia Beach, with stunning shorelines and a popular national park, can make it easier for meeting planners and organizers to incorporate nature for lasting effect. Popular draws at the convention center include sunrise or sunset walks along the beach and oceanfront yoga. The Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge has a beachfront, freshwater marsh, dunes, shrub-scrub and upland forest.

There’s a science to why activities like this are so enjoyable. Research shows that being around water and green space supports our mental health. One intriguing study found that people who spent more time around “blue spaces,” such as beaches and lakefronts, in childhood had better wellbeing several decades later. “Our findings suggest that building familiarity and confidence in and around blue spaces during childhood may stimulate an inherent joy of nature and encourage people to seek out recreational nature experiences, with beneficial consequences for adult mental health,” lead study author Valeria Vitale, a doctoral candidate at Sapienza University of Rome, said in a statement.

Another [study](#) found that walking along a canal or river can boost people’s mental health, with the blend of blue and green spaces lowering anxiety and stress. The study included 300 people, among them 87 who were living with mental illness.

Selecting a meeting location that includes access to

Paying greater attention to details such as sound can play a role in enhancing an indoor event's wellness-boosting potential.

both blue and green spaces simultaneously adds to the benefits. "Canals and rivers contain not only water but also an abundance of trees and plants, which means their capacity to improve mental wellbeing is likely to be due to the multiple benefits associated with both green and blue spaces," says Andrea Mechelli, professor of early intervention in mental health at King's College London, in a statement.

"Canals and rivers also provide homes to a range of wildlife, and we know from other research that there is a positive association between encountering wildlife and mental wellbeing," she said. "Taken collectively, these findings provide an evidence base for what we thought about water and wellbeing and support the proposal that visits to canals and rivers could become part of social prescribing schemes, playing a role in supporting mental health."

Enhancing Indoor Spaces



Even if you opt to hold a meeting in a setting that is full of natural attractions, there will likely be some times you need to gather indoors, whether it is for general sessions, breakouts or meals. Many meeting organizers find that in the sometimes over-stimulating environment of a conference, convention or trade show, creating quiet rooms or safe spaces can give attendees a much-needed place to recharge.

The Virginia Convention Center offers all of these, where

attendees can reboot or nursing moms can feed or pump. "These are quiet places to sit," Noona says.

Regardless of which venue you select, universal design principles provide guidance on how to make the most of indoor spaces to support the mental health and wellbeing of attendees and ensure they can fully access content. These principles were created at the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University and published for the first time in 1997 to ensure that products and environments are accessible, understandable and available to be used to greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

Universal Design Principles are based on several key ideas including equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information (meaning people with disabilities can perceive it), tolerance for error (referring to hazard-minimization), low physical effort and providing appropriate size and space for approach and use.

Many organizations find that when they use these principles, they improve the overall experience and wellbeing of everyone who visits a space. The Cornell Division of Human Resources has published an [Accessible Meeting and Event Checklist](#) to help planners ensure that all attendees get the most out of programs. It includes well-being enhancing ideas covering every aspect of a meeting, such as how presentations are made, with tips like ensuring that speakers, including those asking questions, always use microphones, so it is easier to hear what they are saying, and clearly labeling food options.

Paying greater attention to details such as sound can

Regenerative Events

For ideas on how to incorporate nature into meeting design, Snowden recommends a 2020 report by exhibitions leader IMEX Group called “[The Regenerative Revolution: A New Paradigm for Event Management](#).” It calls on meeting professionals to embrace a “circular economy,” where reusing, refurbishing and resharing resources helps to reduce waste, pollution and carbon emissions.

The report recommends following an experimental framework called Hannuwa, with four key principles.

1. **Design out waste and pollution.** For instance, instead of using single-use PVC and wood to build an exhibition, opt for a modular system that incorporates recycled materials and non-toxic adhesives.
2. **Keep products and materials in use by designing them for durability, reuse, repair, manufacturing and recycling.** A key part of this is using “bio-based” materials. Simple steps can encourage reuse. One example: Remove the event’s name or date from signage and booths so that they can be collected, cleaned and put back into service more easily.

3. **Design for inclusiveness and diversity.** Based on the principle that ecosystems that embrace diversity, equality and inclusion perform better, this concept enhances the wellbeing of everyone involved. “It also requires a mindset where organizers consider how they can use their events and people to catalyze social impact and improve local communities,” the authors state.
4. **Regenerate natural systems.** Key steps include using renewable energy and enabling energy efficiency. For instance, biological waste, such as food, from an event can be composted or converted to energy. A regenerative approach that lowers carbon emissions and embraces local supply chains can contribute to the wellbeing of another key stakeholder in meetings—local vendors.

Ultimately, the authors asked organizers to consider how the event itself provides “ecosystem services” back to the community and “thereby offers enhanced value.”



play a role in enhancing an indoor event’s wellness-boosting potential. It may be as simple as opening a window. [Research](#) has found that seeing and hearing birds makes people feel happier and boosts their mental wellbeing.

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of attendees at meetings can seem like a big undertaking, but the good news is that every effort counts. Choosing a destination that supports this goal can make the meeting planner’s job exponentially easier.

“At the foundation, you have to look at what aspects of wellness are crucial, important and necessary to creating an experience that achieves your goals and objectives—and ask, ‘How can I weave in these aspects into the meeting design?’” Snowden says. “All of those steps can, at a basic level, have an effect on wellness.”

Our whole intention is to support people's wellness.

Destination Case Study: Virginia Beach



Located along the shoreline where the Atlantic Ocean and Chesapeake Bay converge, Virginia Beach has thrown out the welcome mat to meeting organizers focused on attendees' wellness and mental health.

Visitors who come into town for conferences and events enjoy the powerful seaside energy at the Virginia Beach Convention Center, located just six blocks from the beach. The LEED-Gold, nautical-themed facility provides a constant reminder to attendees of the proximity of the ocean's soothing waves. A glass tower, reminiscent of a lighthouse, holds a cafe, executive boardroom, VIP lounge and observation deck. Meeting rooms resemble the interior of a cruise ship, and the ground-floor carpet looks like a beach towel. Natural light floods the space, to the point that often, it's not necessary to turn on the electric lights.

Outside of the conventional center is the city's famous three-mile boardwalk, lined with hotels and attractions, such as four oceanfront stages and the Atlantic Wild Fowl Museum. The walk has plenty of room for joggers, walkers, bikers and rollerbladers and many Instagram-ready sites, such as King Neptune, a 37-foot-tall bronze statue at the entry to Neptune Festival Park.

"We just posted a blog on 'Vitamin Sea and Creativity

for Your Meetings,'" says Sally Noona, CMP, director of convention sales and marketing for the Virginia Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. "As a kid, if you've ever gone on vacation, everyone loves to leave their door open at night, so they can hear the sound of the waves against the shoreline. It puts you into that sense of calm. It does improve your mental state and offers you a chance to be more engaged and in tune with nature and what you wish to learn. Everyone who comes here says, 'I look at that water and let go of all of my angst while taking a deep breath.'"

Virginia Beach is also home to the late Edgar Cayce, a chiropractor and psychic who passed away in 1945. Some consider Cayce the father of holistic medicine, and his teachings on health and psychic readings are still studied today.

The Edgar Cayce A.R.E. (Association for Research and Enlightenment) facility is a health and wellness mecca founded in 1931. "Our whole intention is to support people's wellness, with mental health being a key component," says Corinne Cayce, youth and family programming outreach coordinator and Cayce's great-granddaughter.

Edgar Cayce A.R.E. houses a health center and spa, which offers massages, reflexology, energy work and colonics. Visitors can get a "Cayce Assessment" by a doctor with holistic recommendations. Nestled inside is GRAZE Kitchen & Catering, where visitors can dine on a healthy lunch, artfully prepared by Chef Shelley Kilby and team. Kilby is known for healthy, Southern-style food, made from fresh, locally sourced ingredients. The A.R.E. Library houses what is said

to be the second largest collection of books on metaphysics in the world, with 80,000 volumes that span topics such as parapsychology, comparative religious studies, holistic health and ancient civilizations, along with foreign-language editions of Edgar Cayce books.

“Three-quarters of the readings are health-related,” Cayce notes. “So, if you’re having migraines or anxiety, anything related to stress, the librarians can help you research that. There are tons of other books related to metaphysics.”

Edgar Cayce A.R.E. works with the city to teach groups about mindfulness and stress relief in the workplace, and sometimes hosts tours, according to Loretto Dalmazzo, outreach coordinator. “We provide resources for personal

growth and spiritual development.”

The center backs up to First Landing State Park, with 20 miles of trails and 1.5 miles of shoreline. There, visitors can observe natural habitats including bald cypress swamps, lagoons and maritime forests, along with rare birds and wildlife. Another popular opportunity for meetings is the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, designed to inspire conservation of the marine environment.

A.R.E. isn’t the only wellness facility in Virginia Beach. The city boasts dozens of spas and wellness establishes where visitors can decompress and refresh.

About Elaine Pofeldt

Elaine Pofeldt is an independent journalist and speaker who specializes in entrepreneurship and careers. She is author of the books *Tiny Business, Big Money* and *The Million-Dollar, One-Person Business*. As a senior editor at *Fortune Small Business* magazine, she was twice nominated for the National Magazine Award for her feature stories. Her work has appeared in *FORTUNE, Money, CNBC Inc., Forbes, Crain’s New York Business* and many other business publications and she is a contributor to the Economist Intelligence Unit. Elaine also helps clients with projects such as blogging, ghost writing, white papers, reports, ebooks, custom content, academic editing and proposal writing and editing.



About Meeting Professionals International

When we meet face-to-face, it empowers us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder. That’s why MPI strives to lead the world in education, networking and innovative solutions that advance not only the meeting and event industry, but the careers of the professionals in it. Through MPI’s global network of local chapters, we activate, educate, support and connect the connectors—people who are passionate about bringing people together. MPI serves the entirety of the meeting and event industry, regardless of need, audience or specialization. MPI delivers leadership and education that are not only credible—they’re actionable. We empower our community to visualize and execute one-of-a-kind experiences that inspire people to evolve their outlooks, reexamine their preconceptions and take positive action. Because when we meet, we think in ways previously unthought. Because when we meet, we break through barriers that kept us apart. When we meet, we change the world.® For more information, visit MPI.org.



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Virginia Beach may be all about soft sands and ocean waves, but planning your meeting here puts you right on solid ground. You’ll enjoy not only the full support of our team of meeting professionals—devoted to the details that make your event a success — but an entire network of hotels, restaurants, venues, attractions and services ready to pitch in. From big events at the LEED® Gold Certified Virginia Beach Convention Center to roundtable sessions with an ocean view, your style of meeting is at the top of our agenda. Bring your meeting to life in Virginia Beach. For more information, visit [Virginia Beach](https://VirginiaBeach.com).