

Being virtually at the 34th European Health Psychology Society Conference

Marie Kotzur Since September 2019, University of Glasgow, UK EHPS members had been looking forward to meeting again in Bratislava in 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a significant change of plans and the local organising committee must be commended for shifting their focus to 2022 and agreeing to two more years of preparations. EHPS members instead had the opportunity to meet virtually at the EHPS Online Scientific Meeting. This was my first online conference experience. I would like to share my reflections as a delegate and lessons learned for attending future virtual meetings.

I was impressed by the online conference setup. The EHPS team and EasyConferences managed three virtual meeting rooms to host keynotes, parallel sessions, and roundtables, among others, and even networking sessions. A really varied programme had been put together at presumably very short notice. A big thank you and congratulations to all involved in organising and running the online conference. Comments during the closing ceremony suggested that I am not alone in my gratitude for this opportunity to connect with colleagues far and wide after travel and socialising have become health risk behaviours.

I learned, however, that attending a conference virtually differs in many ways from previous conferences, even after having become quite used to webinars and video calls by the summer.

Managing time and space

Travelling elsewhere to a conference means being removed from the office and everyday research activities. We naturally keep our diaries clear and set automatic email replies to tell people that we are away. Being at a conference is like being at a retreat discussing research ideas and making plans with colleagues, without the distracting expectations to comment on a draft or complete administrative tasks. Equally, conferences provide meals, accommodation and hopefully we have packed enough socks to manage without having to do our laundry.

Attending the EHPS conference from home, despite the conference announcement four weeks prior, meant I was at my desk and my diary was already full of meetings, work scheduled, and deadlines agreed. It meant I had to choose carefully which conference sessions I could join. Attending from home meant my conference participation would also have to fit around everyday tasks like preparing meals, laundry, and washing the dishes.

I met this challenge by turning my days back to front. I listened to keynotes and parallel sessions while sorting the laundry or emptying the dishwasher, struggling to take notes on others' intriguing research on the health impact of the pandemic. Although the steady stream of housework kept me moving, with sessions running back-to-back I struggled for opportunities to take my eyes off the screen or make a fresh pot of tea. I realised there is a benefit to having to change meeting rooms between parallel sessions when I attend conferences in person. After the conference sessions had finished for the day, I completed

research tasks that required my full concentration, often until late in the evening to keep up with my diary. Any conference has a busy schedule, but I usually find them energising rather than exhausting. Here are some things I will try at the next virtual conference:

- Set an automatic reply and respond to emails after the conference where possible; I have already had these from colleagues attending virtual conferences now
- Keep my diary clear for the conference days as if I was travelling (after discussion with my manager) and avoid doing two things at once
- Take notes in a word processor during talks, include screenshots of presented slides
- Stock up on conference style snacks—nuts and fruit, of course, rather than biscuits
- Have healthy but quickly prepared meals, maybe a takeaway meal as a treat
- Watch some sessions in a different room in my house or standing up; there are computer programmes that can be set up to prompt mini breaks away from the desk
- Carefully select which conference sessions to join and use breaks in the schedule to move around or have networking video calls

Keeping in touch

I think the social aspect of conferences, like chatting to groups of colleagues over lunch or having a one-to-one in the poster session, are most difficult to facilitate virtually. Whenever I had joined the networking sessions during this year's meeting, I was on my own. However, I spent a highly enjoyable evening on a social video call that came closest to the social side of previous conferences. Long ago I was advised to be proactive about networking at conferences (e.g. email people to meet in advance), this seems even more important in a virtual setting. I am definitely not going to run into my next collaborator in my own

hallway! Some things I will try next time include:

- Check who is presenting or attending, and email people I would like to talk with in advance to schedule a one-to-one call during the conference week
- Contact presenters after their talks to discuss their work further
- Set up calls with colleagues I only get to see at conferences to have a coffee break and catch up
- Engage with conference activity on Twitter; this should actually be easier being sat in front of a computer anyway
- Join any WhatsApp groups, both for social or for academic chat, to stay connected
- Have a conference dinner with local colleagues (depending on physical distancing restrictions!)

Conclusions

We are learning this year how virtual conferences can work for us. The EHPS Online Scientific Meeting was a success in many ways. We exchanged ideas and learned about each other's research when we might not have otherwise. Even the environmental benefits of not travelling must be considered. We stayed connected, but we may not have got to see as much of each other as we would have liked. As with all changes to usual practice, to make the most of them, virtual conferences may require some behaviour change. Perhaps some of my plans for future online conferences will be helpful to others.



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