



# Establishing a Wellness Center

by Jane Barry





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## Why Create Wellness Spaces at Conferences?

*Recognizing risks to well-being in the human rights activist and practitioner communities and creating sustainability*

There is a growing body of evidence that human rights activists and practitioners across the world are recognizing – and seeking to address – the risks inherent to the work of caring for others. These risks include damage to physical health, mental health and spiritual well-being. They manifest in compassion fatigue, burn-out, illness – and an increasing drop-out rate from the ranks of the caring professions.

Activists and practitioners are beginning to talk about these risks – and seeking innovative and very practical solutions for integrating sustainability and safety into our working culture and organizations.

*But the world is changing -- the need for human rights services is increasing exponentially, while resources are rapidly shrinking*

At the same time, however, the world we work in is rapidly changing, bringing additional stress and pressure into our lives, and very directly increasing the need for our support and services. The use of torture has become ever more pervasive. The changing nature of conflicts (increasing repressive regimes, organized armed violence, use of 'anti-terrorist' legislation against civil society); the deepening global food crisis, increasing natural disasters and environmental distress – are

all exacerbating escalating levels of global violence, poverty and population movements.

Yet as the demand for our services increases, the global financial crisis threatens our capacity to respond to this increasing need. As donor resources shrink, some of the first cuts have been to the budgets of the professional caring services and non-profits. These cuts force our organizations to contract by cutting staff – yet still trying to maintain the same level of services. This ultimately pushes many dedicated activists and practitioners out of the field – and increases the burden of work on those remaining activists/practitioners. And this increases the cycle of stress and pressure on everyone.

### *Threats... Or Opportunities?*

These factors could very rapidly affect the growing movement among activists and practitioners to create a new, sustainable way of working.

For some, the financial crisis in particular could signal a return to business as usual – where concepts of sustainability, safety and wellness are considered an unnecessary luxury.

For others, the financial crisis, combined with growing need, could be an opportunity. It could spark new, innovative ways of thinking and working – ways that embrace sustainability as a core concept for surviving and thriving during these changing times. It could bring communities of activists and practitioners closer together and inspire them to rise to overcome some of the greatest challenges to their work.

There are many possibilities to create this change. One innovation is to intentionally,

strategically integrate sustainability and wellness into planned conferences and meetings.

### *Responding to Crisis with Innovation: Creating Space for Wellness at Conferences*

A Key Strategy – Creating Safe Spaces: Activists and practitioners have consistently reported that one of their key – and most successful – strategies for staying well and safe is through strategic alliance building. Often, this happens when we get together with others in our field or in related fields, formally and informally, to discuss the public and private aspects of the work. These gatherings, at conferences, meetings or other events, all offer potentially safe spaces where, for brief time, participants can find respite from external pressures. They provide an opportunity to rest, reflect and renew – to share ideas and inspirations with our colleagues and to ease the stress of sometimes very lonely work. Activists and practitioners emerge from even brief times of respite like these with a new vitality, with their passion and creativity re-ignited – and these are the key resources needed to find solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

What's Missing: However, this larger value of our conferences – as spaces for shared renewal – has not been recognized. Instead, activists and practitioners find respite in these spaces on an ad hoc and informal basis – between sessions – in much-needed chats over coffee, a good night's sleep, an evening dancing – even in just a handful of exchanged words in a corridor between old friends meeting anew.

The Opportunity: By intentionally integrating concepts of sustainability, safety and wellness into our gatherings, we can maximize the potential of these events as opportunities for both learning and wellness.

Integrating wellness into conferences is also an extremely low-cost, high-benefit investment, as many activities require only a shift in planning, and others can be supported by volunteers.

Here's how.

## Integrating Sustainability at Conferences – an Approach

Integrating well-being into a conference or event can be achieved in various ways – many of them very simple and cost-effective.

A sustainability and wellness approach includes:

- Ensuring that wellness is a consistent, flowing theme throughout the event (whether it is extremely low-key or the major topic, it should be woven into event design and planning).
- Customizing the wellness offerings to ensure they resonate with participant needs and preferences, based on culture, gender, age (among others factors).

Customizing tips:

- Wellness options can be selected based on a quick survey of conference participants.
- Even within a group of like-minded people, you will still find a range of preferences – it is best to offer a varied selection so that participants can choose what would suit them best.

Conference session design considerations:

- Design the agenda to ensure participants have time and space for rest, exercise and informal meetings. Far too frequently, activists and practitioners attend conferences with back-to-back sessions and expectations that they work into the evening.
- Place wellness directly on the agenda: Include in the conference sessions and trainings on self-care, health, spirituality, stress. (Topics can be selected based on discussions with participants.)
- In addition, consider offering a gently facilitated workshop where participants have an opportunity to talk about their concerns and their wellness strategies. This can be a brief, but extremely effective exercise.

- Refreshment choices – ensure that water, herbal teas, fresh fruits and vegetables are available as refreshments (many conferences only have coffee and cookies).
- Essential oils – in some areas, essential oils could be diffused to relieve stress and set mood (this should be guided by an experienced practitioner, while most oils have no side effects, some should be used with caution).

## Wellness Center Description

### *What is a Wellness Center and What can it Offer?*

A wellness space (or spaces) offers information, advice and services. This is a central place where event participants can meet with healers and health practitioners to discuss their concerns, receive treatments and basic trainings. This is also a space where talks on specific subjects could be offered. Note that while some services can be offered on-site in this space, others may be better in an off-site space (for example, it may be possible to arrange for hotel rooms to be set up for massage, etc).

The Wellness Center could also offer additional options such as:

#### Opportunities for movement

- Yoga, pilates, qi gong, tai chi in the morning before sessions begin, or in the afternoon. For more energetic offerings, could have self-defense classes (martial arts), dance classes (salsa)
- Walking meditation opportunities in the afternoon or early evening, hiking or running trails for individuals or groups.

#### Resources

- Books and materials on wellness (for example: *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?*, *Windcall and the Art of Renewal*, *Self Care and Self-Defense for Activists*, *Capacitar Manuals*)

- Brochures about activist retreats and other opportunities (include a list of different retreats)

#### Quiet Space

- Set aside an additional quiet space for meditation, religious observation, silence, gentle movement.

### *Who Could Run a Wellness Center?*

- The center could be staffed by volunteers and run by one or two volunteer center coordinators (contingent on the size of the center – a suggested ratio is about 12:1 – 12 providers to one coordinator).
- Potential sources of volunteers and information material include, among others: Flagstaff area healers (to be researched); Acupuncturists without Borders, Capacitar, stone circles, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, etc.

### *How do you Establish and Run a Wellness Center?*

Suggested steps for establishing a wellness center include:

- a) Select wellness services: If possible, survey a sample of participants to find out priority wellness approaches and preferences. If a survey isn't possible, pull together a few key advisors to discuss approaches and cultural sensitivities.
- b) Identify potential volunteer wellness practitioners: While this will depend on some of the initial discussions among advisors and participants, there are some practitioners that are almost always a good fit (basic massage, Indian head massage, etc.). Some of these can be recruited slightly earlier than others to establish a 'core' group.
- c) Establish volunteer standards: Draw up a list of basic requirements for volunteer eligibility (i.e., affiliated or not, recommended by trusted people, etc.). Considerations include, among others:

- Screening: All wellness practitioners should be carefully screened for appropriateness (i.e., just because someone wants to volunteer and is a healer, they may not be necessarily be good – or particularly appropriate to your participants' priorities and culture.)
- Fractioned affiliation: Consider whether you want to have only practitioners who are registered with formal affiliations, or a range of practitioners who are carefully screened (many healing practitioners aren't formally registered for a variety of reasons including cost, lack of appropriate guiding institutions, and for reasons of principle).
- Ethics and standards: Establish your required ethics and standards guidelines for practitioners (consider issues such as: confidentiality, business soliciting, follow-up plans, ensuring clarity about level of service offered and recommendations to see a physician as needed, etc.)

d) Establish volunteer expectations: Establish what will be offered to volunteers, and what is expected of them: Although practitioners will be volunteering their time, it is important to be clear on what support and benefits they might be offered (for example, can they attend conference sessions, will accommodation be provided or offered at a discount, will meals be included, etc). They should know if they are expected to supply all necessary equipment (massage chairs, towels, essential oils, mats, etc.) or if some of that equipment can be made available at the conference space (possibly donated by a local group).

e) Recruit volunteers: Interview and screen volunteers, draw up a final list and make selection. Remember to keep in mind cultural and gender sensitivity (i.e., balance of genders, as some people prefer receiving treatment and advice from the same gender, others from the opposite).

f) Advertise wellness space to conference participants: Send out either a separate announcement describing the space or included in information packages.

If it is a large conference, put posters up to spread the word, and consider making an announcement at the opening plenary.

g) Establish wellness space(s) at conference center: Ensure that required equipment and materials are ready, publications available as needed.

h) Debrief time: Ensure time at the end of the day for practitioners to debrief. This will allow adjustments as needed (i.e., if some services were oversubscribed and others unattended, then could increase availability of popular services for the next day.

i) Feedback: Include simple feedback forms for participants attending the wellness center to fill out – this is helpful for conference organizers, and also for the practitioners. It may also be evaluated as a component of the overall conference, depending on the conference organizers' interest.

j) Volunteer Gratitude: Make sure to thank volunteers at the conference by name (or we may be able to have a list of names to publish in the conference documents). It would be nice to follow-up after the conference with additional personalized thanks and some of the feedback from participants sent out to the volunteers.

For more information on this topic, please contact Jane Barry at [jane.barry@linksbridge.com](mailto:jane.barry@linksbridge.com). Jane Barry is a principal in the Seattle office. Jane has over 10 years of experience consulting to leading international organizations and non-profits on humanitarian aid, development assistance, and human rights. Jane has a diploma in international human rights from the London School of Economics and a BA in Soviet Studies from Middlebury College. She has published three acclaimed books on the role of human rights activists working in situations of conflict and crisis.



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