

Event Survival Guide for Introverts & the Overwhelmed

By Beth Buelow, ACC, CPC, The Introvert Entrepreneur

Hundreds of strangers.

Back-to-back meetings.

Large, impersonal, windowless rooms.

Small talk and ice-breakers.

“Optional” happy hours and city tours.

For many people, especially introverts, any one of these situations in a day would be draining. **All of them at once? Torture!**

Yet, it’s usually these things – and more – that we encounter every time we go to a large event or conference.

Those of us who thrive on professional growth opportunities tend to enjoy conferences.

Even though the logistics may drain us, we enjoy hearing interesting speakers, leaving with handouts, worksheets and resources, and being challenged to think in new ways. At the end of the day, if we come away with at least one inspiring idea, paradigm shift or meaningful connection, it was worth the stress and expense of our best energy.

But even if we really want to attend an event, if we’re honest, we sometimes have to force ourselves to go. Just anticipating the event makes us preemptively exhausted. Thank goodness for the conferences that provide a minute-by-minute schedule; we can sit with it each morning and do a mental dress rehearsal, plotting our entrances and exits.

The challenge is that most large events seem to subscribe to the notion that **we have to be together every second of the day**, and cram every minute with activity to get our money’s worth. If you want to slip away for some quiet time, you’re inevitably going to miss a keynote, a session or a meal, all undesirable options when you’ve paid good money to be there.

A recent survey I conducted with a colleague highlighted some of the challenges introverts feel at large events. According to the respondents, the **biggest stresses at large events** include:

- unstructured networking
- little to no opportunity for meaningful connections
- not enough places/opportunities to get away from crowds
- pressure to attend social activities before or after (and in addition to) the regular schedule

When asked what affect these stresses had on the event experience, one respondent wrote, “When I take breaks or leave early, I feel like I’m missing out, even though doing so is crucial to my sanity.” Another said, “I usually love them [events] and spend a lot of time with lots of new

people (although no parties and annoying exuberance please!), but I'm knackered the week after."

There is a way to balance our need for downtime with the get-up-and-go of the average conference or major event. Here are four quick tips that will help make attending your next event a little less stressful, and maybe even fun!

Give yourself permission to leave when you need to leave. Nothing says you have to be present every minute of every event. Often you can get the handouts, a recording or notes from a colleague afterward. They give you a schedule and act like it's do or die, but you have a choice to follow it or not! The alternative is ending the day feeling like you've been run over by a Mac truck... which doesn't exactly support having a positive, energizing experience.

Take on the mental role of host. Plan to focus on making others feel welcome by smiling, asking questions and drawing out those who look uncomfortable. Think of a few stock questions in advance: "What's the best presentation you've been to so far?" or "What did you think of the lunch keynote?" Don't spend lots of energy trying to be dazzling; be fully present, curious and sincere. Own your energy.

Anticipate discomfort. A few things we know for certain: room temperatures fluctuate, food quality is a toss-up, and the availability of scheduled free time is unlikely. Look at the agenda and decide in advance where, if needed, you can go back to your room or go for a walk. Consider the advice from this survey respondent: "Planning REALLY helps... bringing a bag with layered clothes, drinks and snacks to events with a packed schedule."

Learn to say "No, thank you." One of the biggest stresses is all of the social extras and obligations that come with being at an event, including (but not limited to) the happy hours, early breakfast meetings and going out with the gang for dinner. While you might feel out-of-the-loop temporarily because you missed hearing the story about the time your boss caught a fish "this big," chances are you'll appreciate your choice to recharge alone much more. Learn to say a firm "No, thanks," and without excuses or being defensive, take care of yourself.

Until that day when planners intentionally make events more introvert friendly (which I'm guessing more than a few extroverts would appreciate as well!), we'll just have to take matters into our own hands and do what we can to take care of ourselves.

Beth Buelow is on a mission to create a world where introverts can be wildly successful while still being authentic. She is a professional speaker, coach and trainer. You can reach her at 253.617.0779, Beth@TheIntrovertEntrepreneur.com or www.TheIntrovertEntrepreneur.com