Virtual Conference
Handbook

Guidelines for Mental Wellness at Virtual Conferences
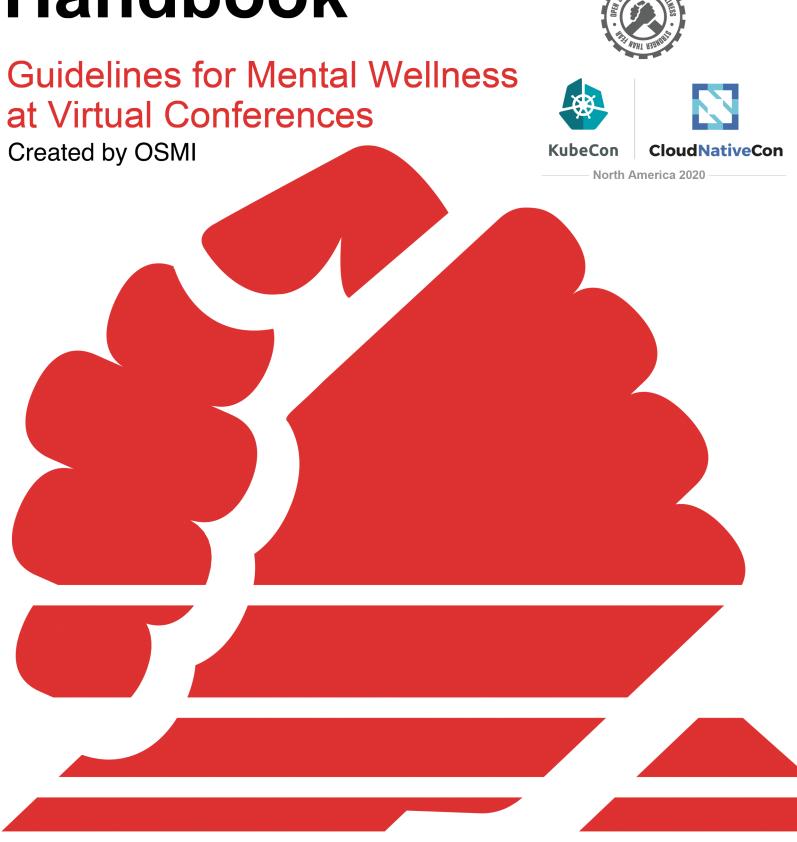
Created by OSMI

KubeCon | CloudNativeCon

North America 2020

OSMI Conference Handbook

PJ Hagerty and Beth Tucker Long, Open Sourcing Mental Illness (OSMI)

This book is for sale at http://leanpub.com/testosmi

This version was published on 2020-11-15

Contents

CONTENTS

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 NA 2020.

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 NA 2020!

Managing Your Own Well-being

While you will find tips in this guide about how to help other people at KubeCon + CloudNativeCon NA 2020, you must first start with yourself. Below you will find useful information to make your conference experience more enjoyable.

Know Your Space

Knowing what software or platforms the virtual conference will be using can help make the conference experience much more comfortable and relaxing. Check the conference website for details on what they will be using. Be sure to install the software in advance and familiarize yourself with how to use it. Some key features you will want to know about are:

- How to view a talk
- How to ask the speaker a question
- How to talk to other attendees
- How to leave feedback for the speaker or conference organizers
- How to interact with the sponsors
- How to participate in social activities during the conference

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. There should be information on the conference website about how to get in touch with them before, during, and after the event. Organizers and staff can help you get logged in to their software/platform and help you find timing information for the talks/events you want to attend. 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. Many conferences will have an official procedure for reporting incidents. This procedure may be posted on their website.

Code of Conduct

The conference may have a Code of Conduct 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. If the conference you are attending has a Code of Conduct, be sure to read through it so that you know who to contact if you need to report a violation. It is important to note that you can report an event even if you are not involved but just have witnessed it happening to someone else.

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. Here are three websites that list international crisis help centers so you can find one in your country or that speaks your language. They are labeled as suicide crisis lines, but they are available to help with any mental health crisis.

- Wikipedia's List of Suicide Crisis Lines: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_suicide_crisis_-lines[1]
- Suicide.org's List of International Suicide Hotlines: http://www.suicide.org/international-sui-cide-hotlines.html[2]

---

[1]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_suicide_crisis_lines
[2]http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html

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/[3] and click on "Resources".

---

[3]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 attending 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. This will give you a chance to process what you have learned and rest a bit before heading back 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 things during 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, so be sure to find out if the conference has a chat room or a breakout chat where attendees can gather to talk.

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.

Interacting With Others

Conferences are stressful times - for attendees, for speakers, and for conference staff. Making the effort to be extra patient and extra kind to others will go a long way to making the conference better for everyone involved.

Be Patient

When dealing with a frustrating situation with another person, take a moment to remember that they may have just received some distressing news that is making it difficult for them to handle other issues. Or perhaps they just had an angry person harass and mistreat them. Or maybe they just found out that a deadline at work has been moved up and they are really worried about how they are going to make the new deadline.

Remember to use gentle and polite speech, to stay patient and calm, and to show gratitude.

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, they will remember that you were willing to help them if they need something later. This will make it easier for them to approach you in the future.

Making Conversations Inclusive

When you sign on to a virtual conference, it can be very easy to hide in the background. People may have co-workers or may already know people in the chat/virtual talk room, but many may be attending solo and may not know anyone. When you are having a conversation, you can make it easy for a new person to join your conversation by posing questions to the group at large to entice more people to contribute to the conversation. You can also see who has not spoken in a while (or at

all) and ask a question directly of that person to help them get started in the conversation. This way, someone does not have to interrupt the conversation to join in, they are responding to an indirect invitation to speak.

If you are in a smaller group, you can use the gallery view in the chat so you can see everyone at once so you can see if there is someone who is paying attention to the conversation but has not gotten a chance to speak. It is also good to keep an eye on mute symbols. If someone unmutes and then re-mutes themselves, it may mean that they want to say something, but didn't feel like they had the chance to do so. Many people will be very hesitant to interrupt someone else who is speaking, and with delays in video/audio, it can be very difficult to tell when it is safe to speak with speaking over the top of someone else. You can then ask them a question directly to give them a more comfortable opening to speak.

If you are in a large group, watching the mute symbols and seeing everyone in gallery view will not be possible. In this case, you can pose a question and then choose two or three names to call out for responses. It is not a good idea to call out one single person in a large group as this really puts someone on the spot who may not be comfortable with it. By asking your question and then asking several people at once what they think, it gives people an easy out if they don't wish to speak, but gives them a more specific invite to participate in the conversation.

For very large groups, you can try to separate people out into smaller groups by having breakout rooms on specific topics or by asking a group of people to respond, like everyone whose name begins with the letter L, etc.

The important thing to watch in all of these cases is that the conversation is not being dominated by just a few voices.

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 recognize that someone is struggling with a mental health issue, here are some things you should do, or 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.

General Wellness

Maintaining your physical and mental health are important in all aspects of your life. Here are some general wellness tips to help you during the conference and any time.

Physical Health

One of the first things to go to the wayside, whether you are a speaker, attendee, sponsor, volunteer, or organizer, is physical health. "I'll grab something to eat later" or "I don't have time for sleep" are 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 during a regular day working from home, so why would you eat that way at a conference?

If you are a three meal a day person on an average day, that shouldn't change when attending a virtual event. Not all conferences provide time for meals - many only include a brief lunch or coffee break. It will be up to you to determine what calories and foods your body needs.

Time of meals may change, especially if the event isn't in your timezone, but you can adjust to make sure you get the nutrition you need when you need it.

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 having a reusable water bottle nearby to refill as needed, and be sure to keep drinking throughout the day.

Step Away

Since many events are trying to deliver content to many, the time for eating options sometimes falls short. Consider taking a conference break and stepping away to grab food at your normal eating times. This way you have more control over your eating, and you can use the conference food break as time to catch up on work or chat with friends on topics not related to the conference.

This is also a perfect way to take a break and see a little more of what the event has to offer - like virtual break-outs or a sponsor area. Make sure, though, to manage your time to avoid missing something you planned to take in at the conference.

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, 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 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 hitting a dinner and drinks with fellow conference goers.

This is just as true with virtual events, where the nature of not having to travel physically gives one an untrue sense of having more energy.

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

Know Your Needs

Long before you get to the conference, you will likely know 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 and 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.

This becomes even more important as more often than not, a conference is in a timezone that is not your native timezone. Take into account that starting early may mean it's difficult to stay late. Monitor the time difference and keep an eye on your local clock.

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.

In the virtual conference setting, it's easy to take some time to rest. There is no shame in running 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 or teammates, especially if you are speaking or your company or organization is sponsoring. This makes sleep management a little easier - take turns being present or resting so your team is always present, but you don't have to be!

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

Eating, drinking, and sleeping are the keys 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 down so low that it takes days to recover.

Taking Breaks

Whether in real life or in a virtual setting, 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's head spin!

Taking breaks or some personal time can help. Whether this means stepping away from your computer or screen for a moment or grabbing 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

Even though you are not traveling to attend the conference, there is still value in making sure to get outside and soaking up some natural light. Researchers have found natural light to help with feelings of depression associated with Seasonal Affective Disorder. Getting a bit of sun (or even if it is cloudy, some natural, non-artificial light) can help you.

So take a walk or sit outside for a few minutes. 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 the 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 stop at every sponsor's booth, etc.

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 your computer and your phone down, walk away, and 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

Part of moving to a virtual environment for a conference is the need to minimize contact. While this means an easy avoidance of outside pathogens, there should still be an emphasis on self-care and keeping clean while at home.

Wash Those 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.

This may not seem as obvious when at home, but washing your hands for at least 20 seconds regularly throughout your day can help to keep your work environment clean and your virtual conference environment clean. It also builds good habits for when you are back in your office or at a conference in person.

General Hygiene

Keeping clean isn't just for hands! Showering and keeping clean while attending a conference (or working from home in general) can often help to keep you feeling fresh and alert. Taking a quick shower or rinse between sessions or as a break can also help to break up the virtual experience and bring you to your next session feeling refreshed and relaxed.

Cleaning Your Equipment

While a virtual event means you won't be shaking hands, you will likely be doing a good deal of typing and clicking. Make sure to keep your keyboard and mouse clean. Wipe them down regularly even if you are the only person to use them and the only person in your home workspace. Make sure the space where you will be attending the talks is clean and decluttered.

Conclusion

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

Conference Staff

Working at a conference can be exhilarating and also exhausting. Here are some suggestions to help staff maintain their own health and also help attendees.

Finding Support After an Incident

After a medical issue, mental health incident, or Code of Conduct violation occurs, it is important to remember there may be physical or psychological trauma. It is important that anyone involved, whether the person who suffered the issue or the people who came to help, have support to deal with things that may come up afterwards.

During the Event

Some event software may have the capacity to provide support staff for incidents. This may go beyond reporting the incident and into some professional assistance.

If there is no local assistance on staff, consider building a way for your teammates to report or support each other at the event. Make sure everyone on your team knows where it is appropriate for them to discuss any concerns or issues in confidence. Make sure no one logs off of the event for the day feeling unheard. Check in with everyone.

On Your Team

When participating as part of a team, it is important you look for signs of issues occurring not only with yourself, but also within your team. Consider taking stock of anything that occurs and ensuring everyone has a teammate they can confide in.

It's also recommended that at least one staff person has been trained in Mental Health First Aid[4].

After the Event

It may be that the effects of a situation do not present themselves on a person until much later. If anyone on your team that was part of the event starts to show signs of having an issue related to a situation at the event, consider encouraging them to speak with someone. This can be someone with Mental Health First Aid training in your organization or a trained professional. Do not assume that because an event is over that any issues that occurred at the event are over too. Make sure to check in and give your team members and attendees an opening to report or discuss any lingering issues.

You will want to ensure anything that happens does not induce long term harm.

---

[4] https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/

Conclusion

When something happens, there can be both short term and long term effects. Being aware of your team and the issues they may be carrying is an important way to ensure no one is suffering from an issue that occurred at an event.

Delegate to Those Willing to Help

While all the suggestions we have laid out in this section are important, the most important thing is to not burn out by taking all these things upon yourself. Your team needs to be willing and able to take on some of the work.

This should not be done haphazardly, and you should identify people who are on board. Once you have communicated the event plan, keep a look out for people who can be given tasks, such as being a point of contact, working through the Code of Conduct, or pairing up teams. This will help you have a smooth running event, a better vendor or sponsor experience, and a better team dynamic overall.

Delegate! It's the first step to empowering a better conference and event team while handling issues in an efficient and manageable way.

Know the Procedure for Processing Medical and Code of Conduct Issues

Many events are lucky in that they are successful in not having any medical or Code of Conduct issues. However, an issue can occur unexpectedly at any time, even at the smoothest running events. It is important to keep the procedure for handling such incidents in mind when participating in an event or conference.

Medical Issues

For medical issues, it's important to be aware of your surroundings first and foremost. It may be important to know where teammates are and to check in on them regularly. This is less paramount with a virtual event, but it is still important.

Be aware of what to do and, if there is no other course of action, do not hesitate to call 911.

Code of Conduct Issues

Vendors and sponsors are just as responsible for knowing the Code of Conduct for an event as any speaker or attendee. While the general intent of most Codes of Conduct are similar, knowing how to take action if necessary may differ from event to event.

Similar to medical issues, knowing who to contact if a Code of Conduct issue presents itself is important. Ensure proper reporting occurs and anyone involved is taken care of. This can be anything from making sure a witness to an incident has their voice heard to comforting someone in need after an incident. Make sure your staff knows that all reports and people involved should be treated with respect, and make sure they know how to get backup from another staff person if they are feeling uncomfortable about handling a report.

While much of this may fall more squarely on the shoulders of organizers, if something happens to you or your team, it's important to be aware of how to handle things.

Conclusion

Knowing what to do at an event is the key to ensuring safety when an issue arises. Have a plan, and make sure your team at the event knows the plan.

Know Who to Contact

The first step for anyone working a conference, be it a vendor, sponsor, organizer, or volunteer, is knowing who to contact when something happens. "What happens" can include a medical issue, a mental health issue, a Code of Conduct violation, or a security-related issue. Any of these things can occur at any given event, virtual or in person.

Vendors and Sponsors

When approaching a new event, it's important to familiarize yourself with the environment. The larger the event, the more important it is to know who to contact in case something happens - most importantly, a team contact and an event or organizer contact.

Having a single point of contact on your team for issues means there is an easy-to-follow protocol should something go in an unexpected direction. This person need not be the same for every event, but should be available at all times when this role is assigned to them.

Knowing what organizer to contact with issues is also important. These folks should know what to do with any emergency situation or Code of Conduct violation. Hopefully, you will have a contact before the event begins and there will be an opportunity to talk with this person and get to know them early in the conference.

These may seem less necessary for virtual events - but the opposite is actually true!! Knowing who you will need to contact are even more critical for a virtual event because it is more difficult to look around a find someone or to even have a way to ask others around you about where to go for help. Often there will be a back channel for sponsors and speakers, though attendees should be clear on where help can be found as well.

Organizers and Volunteers

If you are a part of the team organizing the event, it is likely you will be the "go-to" person, or at least expected to know what to do. Prior to the event, familiarize yourself with the virtual environment before the event begins.

Be sure you and everyone on your team is familiar with and able to execute the tenets of the Code of Conduct. If something does happen, every person on the organizing team should know how to handle it.

Conclusion

Knowing who to find and who to go to when something occurs is a good step to staying physically and mentally prepared to handle an event. This won't help in preventing any issue from occurring, but it will help you to know what to do if an issue arises.

Don't Go It Alone

Most times, as a vendor, sponsor, organizer, or volunteer you are not alone at the conference or event - even if you are the only person in your home during a virtual event! While the immediate benefit of having others there is meeting new people and being part of a wonderful community, a secondary benefit is the ability to partner up during an event and share responsibilities and knowledge.

Work in Pairs

Working in pairs in code and infrastructure is always beneficial. Doing so at conferences and events is just as important. With a team or even just a pair of people, each person has someone they can share with or report to if they witness a Code of Conduct violation, see a medical issue present itself, or in general, just for social well being.

While there are always many people at an event, it is good to have someone with you who is supportive and willing to listen.

Watch Your Pairs

At the event and after, it's important to make sure your pairs work well together. If you notice something unbalanced or one of the members of the pair speaks up about being uncomfortable, work to make sure that pair isn't put together again or work to reassign folks on the fly.

Conclusion

No one should feel the need to face an event alone. Whether they are a seasoned community professional or brand new, making people as comfortable as possible makes for a better experience.

Mental Health is Important

We at Open Sourcing Mental Illness (OSMI) and the Cloud Native Computing Foundation hope this guide has been helpful for you to raise awareness of your mental health at tech conferences and in life in general. Through discussing mental health tips and resources, we hope to help break down the stigma around discussing mental health and make it easier for everyone focus on their mental health and find the resources they need.

Take care of yourself, take care of your community, and thank you for attending KubeCon + CloudNativeCon NA 2020!