

Healthy Hangovers

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Over the past six years of my AFA annual meeting attendance, I have noticed a lot of things. One of these observations is that the annual meeting is a replica of what happens on our campuses. This conclusion can be extrapolated in many, many ways, but I want to focus on healthy choices for now. Like my local university, the reputation is not based on actual behavior. My local university is known for being a pot smoking party school, but when actual behavioral studies were conducted, it was concluded that those that do “party” do so to an extreme AND are a very small percentage of the student body. Meaning, most of the students are moderate in their “party” behaviors, but programming, and therefore reputation focus on the extreme minority of campus community issues.

Over the past few years, I have been taking notes of other annual meeting participants when they mention making healthy choices. This, by no means, is a valid study conducted with IRB approval, but just me reflecting on my conversations in elevators, stairwells, sessions, and the like. I got more intentional about this and emailed several folks after the last annual meeting and right before the next one to gather even more healthy choices that are actively being made by participants!

Exercise

As soon as I hear “healthy choices” I think of working out – sweating – so let’s start there. The host hotels have gyms. There is also the weird idea of going outdoors. I know right? Participants shared with me that they ran one to five miles a day either in organized races in the local communities or in the mornings. Several reported they worked out daily, opted to take the stairs, and even had walking meetings. I love this last idea – walking fireside chats anyone? One participant reported he was very disciplined and ran 34 miles during the conference including a 15 miler right before the closing banquet. Participants used Twitter for work out meet ups throughout the conference. Could Tweet Up Work Outs become another social or networking opportunity? Would that be called “Tweet Outs” or “Twork Outs”?

Food and Drink

After this idea of mine led me down the exercise rabbit hole, food and alcohol consumption showed itself as the next big theme. Whether it was scheduling meetings over breakfast to ensure the day starts off with a good solid meal, or just carrying a bag full of healthy snacks at conferences, participants talked a lot about not getting proper meals in throughout the conference. Even those that said they made a personal commitment to eating healthier seemed to focus on the hurried, rushed, poor nutritional value meals that they eat on the run in between sessions and meetings. It was when an increased awareness plan to actually pay attention and plan accordingly was developed that participants reported better eating habits. “I did not want to shove my body full of crap so I ate food that was good for me instead of whatever was easy and quick.” These healthy food and drink choices often built on a work out plan for the whole conference. We make better choices for the whole conference like getting up early to hit the gym before 7:30 am scheduled breakfasts and the like when there is a big picture awareness.

Participants also talked about intentionally drinking water instead of sodas and in between alcoholic beverages. As for alcohol consumption, there were LOTS of strict self-inflicted rules set in place to balance the social aspect of the conference with the perceived alcohol consumption expectation. One participant proudly reported that he only had one or two light beers each evening. This is particularly interesting to me as a recovering alcoholic. One to two alcoholic beverages a day is still a lot of alcohol and makes me question what the perception of consumption at the conference is? What do these conscientious participants drink in their regular daily lives at home or on the road? Participants shared with me about having these self-imposed limits, but only one person talked about not drinking at all, as a special self-inflicted rule. The drinking expectation or at least the perception of it is very strange to me. Another participant, in response to my question, stated, “It certainly doesn’t help that the opening night so many get plowed at the...reception where they get free alcohol. Free? That must mean I need to consume five times as much – right?”

There may be other recovering alcoholics; I have been sober for 10+ years, at the annual meeting, but I tend to only connect with one colleague with 20 years sobriety on this at the conference. She articulated a very interesting point that I experience at AFA and in my daily life.

“As a recovering alcoholic I find it necessary to make special arrangement for myself at AFA meetings. Traditionally I limit my time at the meeting to a few days and only to those events or times when alcohol is not part of the picture - not because of temptation, but because my choice not to drink tends to cause personal drama for others?! I am surprised and have been for the ten plus years I have attended AFA that my colleagues are so taken aback by the fact that I do not drink. I made arrangements to be with friends that know I do not drink and who are comfortable with that and as such do not tease me or pressure me to drink. I enjoy coffee dates away from the meeting location to get away from the bar scene, arrange outings that are not to bars, and in general take care of myself by not entering into situations where I am exposed to ridicule for not drinking. Moreover, I give myself permission to leave if people I am with get drunk.”

I really appreciate her honest observations, and I have another self-imposed rule. When I am with others that are drinking, I will leave before anyone gets through their second drink. I used to struggle more with this peer pressure, but I really just do not care anymore. I find the more I can plan out the whole annual meeting, I don’t feel pressure to get off schedule and be around people or situations that are outside of that pre-determined schedule.

Time vs. People

No matter how good the sessions or keynotes are, it seems that the most powerful part of the annual meeting are the connections, conversations, and meetings we have in the gaps. So, if we are going to talk about healthy choices, we need to talk about balance. What kinds of choices are being made between our time and our commitments and our health?

Sleep

When I think of my life as a complete big picture, I realize that everything gets off balance as soon as my sleep schedule gets out of whack. Let’s make healthy sleep choices.

Participants with me in the elevator at night shared sleep goals of getting nine hours of sleep a night or only have one beer at “social” time and then heading to bed early. Participants in the elevator in the morning shared they were not exhausted and that this helped them eat better throughout the day – “I am not exhausted so I didn’t want to eat all the crap that I normally would shove in my body.” It seems even having a goal of going to bed before midnight helped set healthy intentions for tomorrow for folks. This also led to a couple of conversations about having an expectation of a bed time helped avoid unhealthy sexual choices. By having a health plan, consuming less or more healthily, and going to bed at a set time, participants talked about their own sense of sexual responsibility by not doing something they would regret in the morning. Besides, they have a plan for the morning already. ☺

Scheduling

To help with managing time during the day, I made a dance card (schedule for the conference) and reached out to those that I know are going to “borrow me for a minute” and scheduled those appointments in advance, including all meals. This helped me not feel jam packed every day and helped me say “NO” when my day is already scheduled. I posted this on Facebook before the annual meeting and got ribbed for “needing to schedule an appointment to say hi to a friend.” I also got asked repeatedly for a copy of the document so others could do the same.

Several participants apologized for not staying the whole conference. I probed a little further to find out that they were balancing personal and professional responsibilities and I congratulated them for making good choices. One went home early from the meeting because she had to balance work and family and could not be gone that long from home. “I’m not sure how that shows balance but it was a conscious decision I had to make to keep life moving both professionally and personally.” I think it does.

The Bite of the Dog – Healthy Choice Hangovers

When I reached out to folks after the annual meeting, I was astonished to hear similar themes coming from participants. One participant reported he was supported by his friends and colleagues and was able to reach some real “milestones” at the conference and was keeping it up upon his arrival home. Another stated, “I wasn’t *as* run-down when I returned home, and I feel like my lifestyle is improving because I took the challenge and built some positive patterns of behavior leading up to and during that week.” Making healthy choices in such a hectic environment, seemed to make people feel healthier and better about themselves. “If I can be healthy at AFA, home is cake.” Another said, “This was the first time that I didn’t feel exhausted at the end of AFA and this was my 7th conference.” The choices this participant made at the AFA annual meeting, “made AFA a much different (and better) experience for me than when I had attended back when I was 22 (or even 32)! To be clear, I still socialized, networked, hung out at the hotel bar, and took part in that aspect of the annual meeting (which I’d argue is potentially the most powerful part). I just felt a LOT better doing it, both physically and about the choices I was making to exemplify my fraternal values. That is what the annual meeting is all about.”