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Take A Deep Breath

How event pros can maintain their mental health during stressful times

By Charles M. Cornell

You've been planning a convention or trade show for the past several months—one that was already postponed due to last year's COVID-19 pandemic.

Days of uncertainty, waiting for a light at the end of the tunnel, vaccines being rolled out, mask rules relaxed, gatherings given the go-ahead...then—boom! With just weeks to go before your event, there's a massive outbreak of the virus with the new Delta variant. Suddenly all the work you put

into shuffling and reorganizing last year's plans is in jeopardy yet again. Just when the economy began making steps back to its pre-pandemic situation and everyone believed the worst was over, event planners have had to deal with the ongoing worries and concerns associated with large-scale assemblies. How can an industry founded on large-scale group gatherings thrive with so much uncertainty?

With the whiplash effect, event planners—particularly those across the

South, where COVID cases have shot up and hospitals are close to capacity in some markets—are suffering frustration and anxiety. There are so many questions running through your mind now: How to keep positive and motivated during this period? How can organizers reassure sponsors and attendees anxious to return to face-to-face events? What about the additional factors of enforcing mask mandates and vaccinations? And how to find time to address one's mental health when many teams are overworked

understaffed, and just trying to get through the day-to-day routine?

Physical and emotional impacts

Health experts agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional stress for everyone. Dr. Lyle Cadenhead, Ph.D., based in Houston, said: “Stress dates back to the beginning of mankind, but there is substantial research that shows that individuals experience stress differently. The National Institutes of Health studied the effect of COVID stress and proposed the COVID Stress Syndrome, consisting of six interrelated elements: Fear of contracting the virus, fear of encountering infected services, fear of socio-economic impact, fear of foreigners due to fear that they are infected, fear of COVID with obsessive checking, and need for reassurance.”

Dr. Nadine Kaslow, Ph.D., based in Atlanta, is a past president of the American Psychological Association and a major presence at Emory University. “Stress can lead us to have physical, psychological, and emotional symptoms. People often experience aches and pains, have a heaviness in their chest, or feel tired, worried, and sad,” said Kaslow. “Long-

term exposure to stress can lead to more serious physical health conditions, like cardiac problems or ulcers. It can also lead to significant psychological problems, like depression, panic attacks, anxiety, or burnout. The main commonality of stress tapped into with the COVID-19 pandemic is a recognition that we all get stressed and that is an understandable reaction.”

‘We just deal with it’

Those in the planning industry have faced a mountain of uncertainty in the past year, due to the ongoing pandemic. “One of the most stressful things for me has been the frequency of changes—adapting to the safety measures that were put into place. Having to communicate and adapt to the rules—masking, distancing, or occupancy limits—really added to the stress,” said Kelly Schulz, senior vice president of communications for New Orleans & Company, the city’s DMO.

Following a one-two punch of pandemic and Hurricane Ida, some of New Orleans’ headline attractions have been put on hold. The annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, scheduled for October 7-17 (after being postponed from April), recently

became one of the latest examples of a major entertainment casualty. “That was a tough call and a major economic and n blow for both visitors and locals,” Schulz said. “We were sad and disappointed, but we understood. Safety has been paramount to us during this period.”


When it comes to meetings and conventions, the story is somewhat different. “On the meetings side, we haven’t seen many cancellations due to COVID,” Schulz said. Due to Hurricane Ida, she admits that large conventions weren’t possible in September and some events were rescheduled. But major meetings planned for October, November, and December went back on schedule. “There are ways that we can host business meetings and conventions that are more controlled, as opposed to the experience of 100,000 people at a festival.”

Schulz credits the recent implementation of vaccine mandates in her city for demonstrating to attendees that they can hold gatherings more safely. New Orleans & Company recently hosted a series of fairs for the community where people could receive a vaccination. “It was an incentive for a lot of locals to get vaccinated, and now more than 70 percent of our city population have gotten the shot,” she said.

“People in New Orleans are pretty resilient,” she added. “We’ve done everything we can to say to our team ‘I’m sure you’re taking care of yourself and we’re going to get through this.’ Some good that came out of the pandemic was a recognition of just how important conventions are to our economy.”

Laura Kuechenberg, senior vice president of ConferenceDirect, based in South Carolina, agrees the biggest challenge has been the frequent changes. “The keywords have been uncertainty and flexibility. Adapting to the new event paradigm has been very stressful. Event planners have had to manage changes from in-person events to virtual and hybrid events, learning new skills for providing health and safety guidelines and monitoring them. Also, managing the additional costs and needs required for hybrid events has been especially challenging.”

But despite the learning curves, Kuechenberg said by and large things have



7 TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS

Event planners are renowned for having Plan Bs and backup strategies. Dr. Cadenhead suggests dealing with stress using a similar approach, and prescribes the following tips:

1. Know your personal preferences for self-care and methods of relaxation.
2. Learn what to expect when confronted with stressful situations.
3. Know yourself and appreciate that you may deal with a stressor in an ineffective fashion. (Some choose to ‘put their head in the sand’ and then get pummeled all at once; others may try to kill the feeling with alcohol or other substances.) Develop a healthy alternative coping method.
4. Prepare yourself so you will know what to do in a stressful situation.
5. If possible, see the stress as an opportunity to grow.
6. Get help or seek advice from those who have faced stress before and gotten through it.
7. Learn to accept the things you can’t control and try to adapt.

been ‘business as usual.’ “Honestly, my routine has not changed. We have seen a small number of cancellations across our portfolio, representing less than three percent of our in-person meetings. But most of our customers who have in-person events in the fall are still full speed ahead. I have found that detailed communication is more important now than it ever has been.”

Gloria Frey, director of convention sales for the Mississippi Coast Coliseum and Convention Center in Biloxi, said, “We never had to shut down throughout the pandemic. We just enlarged the spaces, spread out tables, and we offered hybrid events. As far as daily stress goes, we just deal with it.”

Having vaccinations and mask guidelines in place has been important in keeping things moving in the industry, but that comes with challenges as well. “We’ve definitely seen pushback on masks among attendees,” said Frey. “In fact, when we were under a mask mandate, we had to hire security guards for our events. The client had to pay for it, just to ensure people were putting on their masks. It was really like pulling teeth.”

Eric Gee, expo director for Southern Forest Products Association, out of New Orleans, stresses the importance of knowing the event’s demographics. Gee recently hosted a trade show out of Atlanta.

“In this case, it was middle-aged men from the South. Knowing that, we had to set our policies in place based on what the local officials were saying, and what I felt the tolerance level of our attendees would be,” he said. “We got zero pushback and only one complaint out of probably 1,500 attendees. If anything, based on the surveys, people would have preferred for protocols to be a bit more restrictive—requiring a vaccination, etc. But it’s key to know that demographic and what your audience wants.”

Gee also emphasizes the importance of knowing your team. “I try to be cognizant of my team’s feelings and energy levels. When you’re working a trade show, you can see everyone is exhausted at the end of the day. Rather than try and force an agenda, it’s okay to let them just relax and chill out.”

Support strategies

“There are many things that people can do to cope with stress in uncertain times,” said



Southern Forest Products Association expo.

Dr. Kaslow. “The first thing is to notice when you feel stressed. Pay attention to your body’s signs of stress (like problems sleeping and eating or having a low level of energy) and the emotions you are experiencing that may indicate stress (like being irritable or feeling burned out).

“Engaging in relaxing activities regularly is very helpful, like meditation or yoga. It really helps people to get regular exercise. Also, staying connected to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers can make all the difference in the world.”

Kuechenberg agrees that a regime of physical activity is important in keeping motivated and positive. “I believe it is important to take care of yourself first. I keep my same routine: beach walks at sunrise and bike rides in the afternoon. It’s truly a game changer and I hope more people will give this a try. Even for 30 minutes a day, the results are amazing. Take time for you.”

Having a supportive work atmosphere is also important to keeping everyone healthy. “I have a group of my associates on a group text who are in touch daily,” said Kuechenberg. “There are also more support groups available through industry organizations, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Meeting professionals are already considered to be working in a role that is extremely stressful. So, having an outlet is important.”

Looking ahead, those in the industry are optimistic and hopeful. “For me, the silver lining has been the improvement in tech communications with our contractors,” said Gee. “We hosted webinars for our exhibit and we did them strategically. We used the technology to tell them how to have a successful event, introduce them to the plan and talk directly to the people involved. I think that’s where the tech was helpful this year will be moving forward.”

“The one good thing about stress is that it can certainly be addressed with good mental health hygiene,” said Cadenhead. “A well-developed plan will greatly enhance ability to deal with stress. While stress is diverse, coping skills will help everyone. No one can completely avoid stress, but we can change how we respond to it.” ■

Charles M. Cornell is a freelance writer based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He was born in Gulfport, Miss., graduated from Loyola University New Orleans, and has written articles for New Orleans City Business Magazine, Health Care New Orleans, The New Orleans Tribune, The Kenner Picayune, Successful Meetings, and Coast Business. In the past 12 years, he served as public relations manager for Feld Entertainment.