Hugging Etiquette at Meetings and Events

There is a wonderful social aspect to our work. The personal relationships developed through the AMA are a great benefit from AMA involvement, and we do not want to change that. But we do need to recognize and respect that not everyone wants a hug, even a “business hug.”

Consistent with our commitment to ensuring a respectful and professional environment at AMA-hosted meetings and events, and our zero-tolerance policy toward unwelcome conduct – including unwanted physical contact – attendees should exercise consideration and respect before greeting others with a hug.

There are any number of reasons why individuals may not want to be hugged. These may include one or more the following, among others:

- Cultural values
- Religious values
- Reticence against close physical contact with someone they do not know or have just met
- Physical contact of a hug can be triggering

That said, individuals who prefer not to be hugged need not explain why and should feel empowered to decline the hug. Responsibility for ensuring that a hug is welcomed (or not) rests with the “hugger.” Therefore, before initiating a hug, huggers should gauge the situation and the other person’s signals – including body language – to determine whether a hug would be welcomed.

**Tips for Huggers**

- Seek permission from the other person before you hug them
  - This includes people you have hugged in the past. The hugs may have been offensive in the past, but the person did not tell you.
  - Be especially attentive to seeking permission from people you’ve just met, barely know or have not hugged in the past.
- Make a clear, obvious physical gesture communicating that you would like to hug the person and only proceed if the other person approaches you to accept your hug
  - Extend your arms up for an embrace but do not move towards the person, let them approach and hug you first.
- Consider power dynamics, especially between physician members and AMA staff. Think carefully about physical contact with AMA staff.
- Also consider power dynamics between AMA senior leaders and others.
- **DO NOT** treat the person any differently because they did not accept your hug.

**Tips for Non-Huggers**

- Verbalize that you do not want to be hugged
  - No explanation or reason is needed.  
  - Examples include:
    - “Don’t hug me”
    - “I would prefer not to be hugged.”
    - “I’d like to greet you with a handshake.”
- Deflect with humor or communicate more subtly.
  - Examples include:
    - “Please, no hugs today.”
    - “You’ve just entered a ‘no hug’ zone.”
- Stiff arm the hugger – stiffen your arm and extend your hand for a handshake or fist bump.
- Use other signals or body language to communicate that you do not want to be hugged
  - Step back from the person seeking to hug you and, if necessary, raise your hands in front of you
  - Use words and body language together to communicate
- The best way to handle the matter will depend on the specific circumstances. Different approaches work for different situations.

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