

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Your Environment Makes a Difference | November 2022



When you pause to take an objective look at your surroundings, you'll notice ways you can improve the atmosphere.

Your Environment Makes a Difference

This holiday season, try to set aside some time to evaluate ways you can create environments that are relaxing and conducive to well-being all year long.

It's important to pay attention to how you feel in a place. The environments in which you work and live affect your physical and mental health. For example, a room or outdoor space can have a calming or agitating effect. Aesthetics, familiarity and what you see, hear, breathe, touch and smell can elicit changes in your mood, sleep patterns and energy level.

Atmosphere can convey a sense of comfort, security, chaos or danger. The attitudes of people who share an environment also make a difference: Are they friendly, standoffish, relaxed, tense?

When you visit someone's home or workplace, you may detect a positive vibe or feel uneasy. You might subconsciously respond to the lighting, color scheme, use of plants or art, furniture arrangements, or whether the space is messy or clean.

What Can You Do?

Step back and take a close, objective look. This is particularly essential if you spend a lot of time in the space you are evaluating because you may not even notice aspects that could be changed for the better. Make a note of steps you can take to improve the atmosphere. Adjustments do not have to involve major behavioral changes or a big financial investment – they can be modest ones. And when you're not in control of the environment, psychologists suggest adjusting your attitude to express gratitude for the ways it helps meet your needs.

Here are some suggestions.

Start with the Air

1. Use an air purifier or filtration system to remove infectious viral particles, pollutants such as chemicals and smoke, and allergens like pet dander, dust and pollen. Cleaner air helps prevent symptoms of asthma and hay fever, and it contributes to overall quality of life.
2. Try using a diffuser containing essential oils with properties shown to help alleviate anxiety, promote quality sleep or lift mood. Some people like to burn fragrant candles.
3. Place live plants in strategic locations. In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, they absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen, help clean the air and increase humidity.
4. Run a humidifier to add moisture (usually during winter when heat dries the air) or a dehumidifier

(when it's hot and humid) to reduce moisture. Both have health benefits depending on the conditions. For example, a humidifier helps relieve dry skin, chapped lips and cold symptoms. People with asthma may prefer dry air if humidity triggers symptoms.

5. Check air ducts, use vents, and clean or replace screens and filters on windows, fans, and heating and air conditioning units. Wash rugs, carpets and other dirt and dust magnets.
6. Adjust room temperature – not too hot, not too cold. Ideal temperature varies depending on the location and season of the year; the age, weight and gender of occupants; personal preference; heating and cooling source(s); and other factors. A range of 68-76°F is typically recommended. The World Health Organization suggests a lower temperature range of 61-68°F.
7. Don't smoke. If you need help quitting, enroll in a smoking cessation program.

Attitude Adjustment

In the winter when there is less natural light, people tend to experience depression, anxiety, fatigue and irritability. During this time, the pineal gland in the center of the brain increases production of melatonin, a hormone that causes sleepiness. Recommended environmental changes include getting exposure to sunlight by opening curtains and blinds during the day and using lighting effectively indoors. Playing upbeat background music and going outdoors to get natural light and be close to nature also help lift mood.

An estimated 4 to 6 percent of Americans suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression associated with seasonal changes. People with SAD may have suicidal thoughts, feel hopeless or worthless, lose interest in daily activities, find it difficult to concentrate or experience sleep problems.

Light therapy is the primary recommended treatment for SAD. A light box may be used daily indoors to mimic natural outdoor light. A dawn simulator is a device that can be used in the bedroom to gradually brighten light, similar to sunrise. Other treatment approaches may include medications, cognitive behavioral therapy and exercise.

Other Tips

During the holidays, many people report experiencing higher levels of stress than normal despite their best efforts to manage it. To reduce stressors in your environment, consider these options:

- Put up (work-appropriate) holiday decorations if that's fun for you
- Use a device to produce relaxing sounds like rain or white noise (to mask other sounds)
- Rearrange furniture to better fit the space
- Hang up or replace a picture or painting
- Use natural colors (like green, brown or blue) in your decorating scheme
- Paint a dark room a lighter color
- Replace worn curtains, floors and carpets
- Keep soft throws handy for rest times
- Get rid of clutter, repurpose and recycle
- Hire a service to do deep cleaning
- Display items with positive messages
- Keep pet food dishes and litter boxes clean

Finally, try adopting the Danish practice of *hygge* to create a cozy environment that brings contentment to your soul. *Hygge* encompasses everything from collaborating with colleagues in a warm and inviting space, to snuggling at home under a blanket with a good book and cup of hot chocolate, to sitting by the fire or sharing a candlelit communal dinner. It's up to you.