

Zeroing In: Surroundings – Physical and Emotional

*Your physical, mental, and emotional surroundings are important for your health. They affect how your genes work, and your genes control how healthy you are and how long you live.
Where are your favorite places to be, and why?*



Key Points

- Everyone reacts differently to the environment. How can you create a place where you can find peace and healing?
- Ask for additional support with your Surroundings if you need it. It might help to work on Surroundings with the people you live with, loved ones, your neighbors, or other members of your community.
- Always keep emotional surroundings and safety in mind too.

Improve Where You Live. No matter where you live (house, apartment, motor home, etc.), improving your home environment can improve your health.

- If you are homeless, the VA has resources to help. Be sure to ask your healthcare team for support. Many VAs have experts who work with homeless Veterans.
- Think about your senses. Can you see well? Are the noises too loud or too quiet? Are there foul smells? Is the temperature, okay? A healthy living space should be dry, clean, free of pests and toxins, safe, and maintained. Air flow should be good.
- Improving where you live includes cleaning up your neighborhood. Is there trash you can get rid of? A common space you can help fix up.

Get More Organized. Keeping things needed can help improve your mental state, improve cleanliness and hygiene, and improve safety.

- Are you able to clean your living space, or do you need help?
- Do you hold onto things that clutter your living area? Clutter can increase falls and be a home for pests like roaches. The VA sometimes has volunteers who can help you organize.

Improve Where You Work. Where you work may or may not be the same place as where you live. Some things at work may be out of your control, but even small changes can help.

- If you need extra training to get the job you want, some VAs have vocational training to teach you the skills. Ask your healthcare team about the resources at your VA.
- Does your workspace cause your health problems? Is your body in a comfortable position? Are you at risk of injuries from doing the same movements all the time?
- Co-workers can affect your stress and health. Do what you can to get along with coworkers.

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Emotions

Improve Emotional Surroundings. How your surroundings make you feel is important for your mental health.

- Violence and abuse happen to about a third of people, of all races and genders. Do you live in fear? What resources do you need to feel safe?
- The news can have a negative effect on our emotions. Consider trying a medium fast.
- PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems are as important to handle as other health issues. What do you need to feel healthy and at ease?

Healing Environments

Create Healing Environments. Many things in your surroundings can support good health. To stay healthy or recover from illness, what kind of place is most helpful?

- Colors affect how you feel. Soft blues and greens can be calming. Yellows and reds might rev you up more.
- Sounds also matter. White noise can be very calming and help people sleep.
- Smells also affect us. Fresh air is healthy, smoke, and other air pollution are not.
- Focus on touch. How do your chairs feel to sit in? How is the temperature?
- Add little touches to make a place feel like home, like a plant, a family photo, or artwork.

Reduce Toxins

Reduce Toxins. Your body is constantly protecting you from toxins (poisons) in the environment. Keep your exposure to them as low as you can.

- Keep your areas free of smoke.
- Do not use products with a lot of chemicals in your home.
- Clean regularly to keep dust and pests out of your area.
- Drink plenty of water. This is a simple way to flush toxins out of your body.

Time in Nature

Spending Time in Nature. Studies show that time in nature helps us live longer, with fewer strokes and heart attacks. Green spaces can help our memory and speed up recovery after surgery.

- It helps to look at pictures or listen to recordings of nature if you can't get outside.
- Having plants in your home or workplace is another way to have nature near you.

One Small Change

Make One Small Change. Here are a few more suggestions you could put in your Personal Health Plan:

- Don't smoke.
- Organize even just a small space in your home. Sweep a room. Clean out the closet.
- Add a personal touch to an area you spend a lot of time in.
- Hang a picture or add other art.
- Don't use social media for 1 day.
- Spend 15 minutes in a park or go on a hike.
- Listen to waves for 5 minutes on your computer/phone.
- Pick up five pieces of trash that you come across.
- Drink a glass of water.
- Eat a handful of vegetables.
- Spray lavender oil next to your sleeping area

Surroundings Links

Whole Health Library Veteran Handouts. These are indexed at

<https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp>.

- An Introduction to Surroundings for Whole Health.
<https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/docs/IntroSurroundings-508Final-10-25-2018.pdf>.
- Assessing Your Surroundings. <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/Veteran-Handouts/docs/AssessSurround-508Final-10-22-2018.pdf>.
- Ergonomics: Positioning Your Body for Whole Health.
https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/Veteran-Handouts/docs/Ergonomics_Final508_07-25-2019.pdf.
- Too Much Bad News: How to Do an Information Fast.
https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/docs/TooMuchBadNews_Final508_07-25-2019.pdf.
- Toxins and Environmental Inflammation. <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/docs/ToxinsEnvironInflam-508Final-12-14-17.pdf>.
- Toxins and Your Health. <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/Veteran-Handouts/docs/ToxinsYourHealth-508Final-10-25-2018.pdf>.
- Workaholism. https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/Veteran-Handouts/docs/Workaholism_Final508_07-25-2019.pdf.

Other VA Whole Health Resources

- A Patient-Centered Approach to: Surroundings.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge3tx1klZrc>

Getting Organized

- National Association of Professional Organizers. www.napo.net. Resources to help organize and clean.
- The following apps sync across different media to remind you of tasks in a way you think is best. They have free versions.
 - Evernote. <https://evernote.com/>.
 - Remember the Milk. <https://www.rememberthemilk.com/>.

Avoiding Toxins

- Tox Town, National Library of Medicine. This site has user-friendly images that not only show the user potential sources of toxin exposure but also link to reliable government sources.
<https://webharvest.gov/peth04/20041117151232/http://toxtown.nlm.nih.gov>
- VA Public Health web page. <http://www.publichealth.va.gov>. Multiple resources, including a section, "Military Exposures."
- Environmental Working Group. www.ewg.org. Has guides that focus on everything from pesticides in foods to green household cleaners and cosmetics.
- Green Guard. <https://www.ul.com/services/ul-greenguard-certification>. Source for guidance regarding healthy building materials and products.
- Detoxification diet information from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.
<https://www.eatright.org/>.

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- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Finance and Operation: Environment, Health and Safety. <https://ehs.unc.edu/departments/workplace-safety/>. Has great practical tips for improving ergonomics when working in different settings. Makes suggestions for healthy tools and office supplies too.

Resources for Safety

- National Center for Prevention. http://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy_Living/ has a number of resources for safety as part of the Healthy Living Messages.
- VA Office of PTSD, Military Sexual Trauma Information. <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/types/violence/military-sexual-trauma-general.asp>.
- National Domestic Violence Hotline. <https://www.thehotline.org/get-help/>.

Resources for Home Environments

- Homelessness Resources for Veterans. <http://www.va.gov/homeless>. A look into some of the VA resources for homeless people
- National Coalition for Homeless Veterans Helpline. <https://nchv.org/> (1-800-VET-HELP).
- HGTV. <https://www.hgtv.com/design/decorating/clean-and-organize/home-office-organization-quick-tips>. Has some practical tips and tricks to clean up and organize the house. There are also some videos to show you how.

Resources for Work Environments

- US Occupational Safety and Health Administration. <https://www.osha.gov/>. Covers an array of different topics ranging from toxins to workers' rights, ergonomics, and more. The Safety and Health Topics page specifically has an alphabetical listing of many topics. <https://www.osha.gov/topics>.

Emotional Surroundings: Help guides.

- An organization devoted to supporting mental and emotional health. <https://www.helpguide.org/>
- See their Emotional Intelligence Toolkit at <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm>.