Assessing Your Surroundings
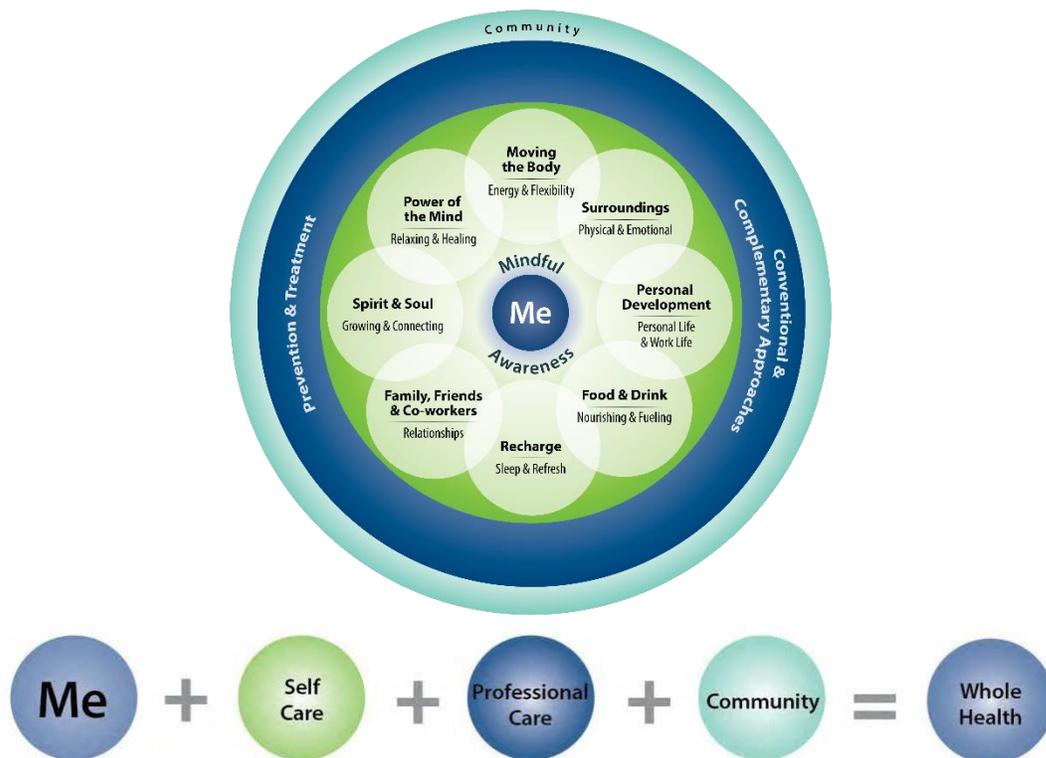

Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/

Assessing Your Surroundings

Do my surroundings affect my health?
Yes! For most people, there is a strong connection between where they are and how they feel. Your breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, stress levels, and brain chemicals are all affected by your environment.[1] You may not think that this is true for you, but there are a lot of things happening in your body that you do not even realize.

How can I figure out if my surroundings are good for me?
It's intuitive really; trust your gut. The rest of this handout will include tips and recommendations that many people respond to in positive ways. But, you are a unique individual, so if you do not find the suggestions to be true for you, that's OK.

Some people look at a room and know right away what they like and do not like about it. For most of us though, it is hard to identify or express what we feel.

The following are questions you might consider:
- Is there a room that makes you feel happy or sad?
- Are there places that just thinking about stresses you out (like a doctor's office)?
- Is there an item that makes you happy, sad, or mad? What about it makes you feel this way?
- Is there a noise that immediately makes you cringe when you hear it? Or a sound that can't help but make you smile?

These are important things to think about. This is because your past experiences and what you associate with places has a strong effect on how you will currently react to a location.

Surroundings can trigger bad memories for some people, like in PTSD. If this happens to you, consider working with a mental health provider. This provider can help you break the connection your mind has made between a location or sound and a bad memory. He or she will help you work through these memories and emotions.

Safety is also important. If your gut tells you that you are not safe, try to find out why. If your neighborhood is not safe, consider bringing it up with the community because if you don't feel safe others likely feel the same way. You might consider attending a town hall meeting.

What are some things about my home or workplace I should be looking at?
A good place to begin is to adjust your surroundings to remind you of good memories—like the smell of your favorite meal, a relaxing beach, or being in the safe arms of a loved one.

If you're still lost on how to start, then you might want to consider the following things:

- Natural lighting during the daytime is helpful. This can especially help improve sleep quality.[2] To improve sleep even more, a dark, quiet room at nighttime will also help. For more information on sleep, see the following Whole Health handouts: "Hints for Encouraging Healthy Sleep," "Change Your Habits to Sleep Better," and "Counseling for Insomnia."
- Fresh, moving air is helpful; consider an open screened window if possible or a ceiling fan.
- Cool colors can calm the nervous system. These might include soft blues and greens, coral, pale gold, or rose. On the other hand, if you go to a room to be more active or productive (like a workspace) you might choose warmer colors, like red, orange, or yellow.[3]
- Consider adding artwork that is meaningful to you. Artwork that includes a nature scape is a safe choice. Try to avoid artwork that brings up dark feelings or bad memories. Studies have found that artwork that is abstract, that is an optical illusion, that include close-ups of animals looking directly at you, or that seem to show the dangers of nature can cause anxiety and poorer health in people.[4]
- Temperature is an individual thing, and there is no ideal temperature for people.

What is the one thing I can change so my surroundings help my physical, mental, and emotional health the most?

Many studies find that nature has positive benefits on the body and mind. Finding ways to bring nature colors, sounds, or art to a room will get you some of the benefits. Being closer to nature can decrease your blood pressure and cortisol (a stress hormone) levels. Some studies are finding that people who are closer to nature cope with life stressors, depression, and anxiety better than those who live further away from nature.[5] There's also a lot of research looking into how being in nature can activate certain parts of the brain associated with compassion and kindness and can change brain waves to a type that is more relaxing and healing.[6]

What if I live in the city?

It's OK! Nature does not always have to be a forest or an ocean. Nature can also be parks, playgrounds, gardens, or any green space, even a backyard or a window box. Some research has found that children living in apartments closer to parks and green spaces were less hyperactive and had fewer attention problems than children who lived further away from green spaces.[7]

There are many ways you can bring green space closer to you if you cannot be near a park. One option might be to have indoors plants in your house or workspace, or a small outdoor garden. Another way you can benefit from nature is by listening to nature sounds. If you meditate or would like to try it, Calm (https://www.calm.com/) is a free mindfulness meditation app that includes nature sounds. There are also many CDs with nature sounds.

Other questions to consider about your environment:
- Is the space warm and welcoming?
- Is the space free of clutter and easy to navigate?
- Is your space clean and safe?
- Is your furniture supportive and comfortable?
- How does the area smell? Is it fresh? Do you have access to fresh air? How about a gentle fan to move the air around the room?
- Is your environment quiet? Do you have a quiet room for sleep or meditation? How about relaxing music to play in the background?
- Are your lighting levels appropriate? Bright enough for you to read by but dim when you are just trying to relax?
- Can you use warm colors on the walls to create a relaxing atmosphere?
- Can you add artwork on the walls or display small crafts or interesting figurines?
- Do you have access to or views of nature? Can you bring nature indoors in the form of potted plants or window boxes?
- How does the area make you feel? Does it make you feel secure, safe, and confident?

For you to consider:
- Do you want to spend some time figuring out how to be in surroundings that are best for you? Is this something you want to focus on?
- Is there anything in particular that grabs your attention in this handout?
- Do you want to work with a mental health provider on breaking connections that your mind has made between a location or sound and a bad memory?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on your surroundings	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp
Calm—a mindfulness meditation company	Mindfulness meditation app that includes nature sounds.	https://www.calm.com/

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