

HEALTHY HOME ENVIRONMENTS

Optimizing your space to improve your mental health is something that anyone can benefit from. For those living with mental health conditions, it is one tool of many that can be used to improve and support your mental well-being.



PRACTICE TIDINESS

Keeping your living space clean is shown to promote calmness and a sense of control over your day-to-day life. Your home environment doesn't need to be spotless, but clutter can be harmful to your mental state – contributing to depression, trouble focusing, confusion, and stress.¹ Not only can clutter be distracting, but it has been shown to actually make it harder for your brain to think clearly.² Neatness also provides predictability, which can cut down on brain fatigue and anxiety. Less time looking for lost items or getting distracted is always a good thing.

WHAT CAN I DO TO CREATE A TIDY SPACE?

Start small. If beginning to improve your space feels overwhelming, choose one area to start. Consider setting a timer each day to dedicate time toward improving your space.

Be mindful throughout your day. Instead of putting items down and adding to your clutter, get in the habit of putting them away. Small things, like putting clothes away right after they are washed, can help lessen the tasks when you go to clean later.

Practice mindfulness while cleaning. One study found that people who were mindful while washing dishes – taking time to smell the soap, feel the water, and absorb the experience – reported a 27% reduction in nervousness, along with a 25% improvement in mental inspiration.³

Once your space feels clean, think about organization. How can you maximize your space and be intentional about organizing to avoid future clutter and mess? Having a clean and organized space can help you feel in control and calm.⁴

Get rid of unneeded belongings. Periodically going through your place to find items to donate or get rid of can go a long way toward keeping your home minimally cluttered and clean. If you have so much clutter that you're embarrassed to have people in your home and getting rid of possessions is a major struggle for you, you might be experiencing signs of hoarding disorder.

MAKE YOUR BEDROOM SLEEP-FRIENDLY

For good mental health, it's particularly important to pay attention to your sleeping conditions. Poor sleep is known to sometimes trigger or worsen mental health challenges, while getting quality rest can protect your mental health. Your surroundings come into play with things like temperature, light, and noise.⁵

WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY SLEEP?

Keep it cool. The ideal sleeping temperature is 60-67°F. Keep a fan around for warm nights, and blankets nearby for cold nights.⁶

Lessen excess noise. If you live with others or in a busy area, distracting sounds like traffic or neighbors might keep you up at night. You can use a noise machine, or find sleep music or white noise online to drown out annoying sounds. If no sound at all is what you need for a restful night's sleep, you could try using ear plugs.

Make your space dark. Try to limit the amount of light in your space, including electronics such as your phone or television, which create blue light that can disrupt your body's circadian rhythms.⁷ Use blinds or blackout curtains to keep outside light from getting in – especially if you work nightshift and need to sleep during the day.



CREATE COMFORT

A big part of a mentally healthy living situation is feeling like your space gives you comfort, support, and calming energy. This could look like keeping comfort items around. Your favorite blanket, a meaningful gift, or a candle in your favorite scent can go a long way in helping you feel more at home. Your home can also impact your mental health based on colors, natural light, and set-up. Appropriate light, furnishing textures and patterns, and room organization can help reduce signs of anxiety and depression.⁸

WHAT CAN I DO TO CREATE COMFORT?

Notice how you feel in different parts of your home. What spaces feel the most comfortable and why? Consider how you can include those elements in other areas of your home that don't have the same energy.

Know that there's no one-size-fits-all ideal home environment. You might need to rework things a few times to find what's best for you.

Personalize your space. Put up photos of you and your loved ones, display your favorite belongings, and decorate with the intention of creating a specific feeling, like joy, creativity, or peace.

Don't let finances prevent you from changing your space. Being more comfortable in your space might be as simple as moving furniture around, swapping wall art between rooms, or opening up your blinds to let in more natural bright light.

CHECK AIR QUALITY

Good air quality can raise oxygen levels in your brain, boosting mood and focus.⁹ It's also associated with reducing the effect of stress hormones and promoting better sleep.¹⁰ While getting fresh air directly from outside is ideal (mostly because of the other benefits of nature), filtered air protects your well-being, too. You can also get a number of similar benefits from the way you breathe.

According to a 2022 literature review, 95% of studies on outdoor air pollution, mental health, and human/animal brains found that exposure to polluted air changes the brain. Of the studies, 73% reported that those exposed to above-average levels of air pollution showed more symptoms and behaviors associated with mental health challenges.¹¹

Many studies on different breath awareness and regulation techniques have found them to reduce symptoms of stress, depression, and PTSD.¹²

WHAT CAN I DO TO BREATHE BETTER?

Check the air quality. Go to airnow.gov to see the air quality in your ZIP code.

Open windows. Let air in as weather allows and if you live in an area with low levels of air pollution.

Use an air purifier. Better indoor air quality and flow can help you think more clearly.¹³

Do some breathing exercises. Try slowly breathing in through your nose for five seconds and out through your mouth for five seconds. The way you breathe has a strong impact on helping you regulate your emotions. Diaphragmatic breathing can improve attention and levels of cortisol (the stress hormone).¹⁴ Visit bit.ly/41PYLHP to find additional breathing exercises.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

When you're struggling with your mental health, just getting through the day can be hard, but there are things you can do to your space to help yourself be more productive and reach your goals. Ultimately, a healthy home environment will look different from one person to the next. It might take time, thoughtfulness, and multiple tries to get your space to meet your needs, but eventually it will help make your space feel right for you.

WHAT CAN I DO TO SET MYSELF UP FOR SUCCESS?

Remove barriers to healthy habits. Try putting your cleaning supplies or chore schedule in sight if you want to be better about keeping things neat, or place fresh fruit on your counter if you want to eat healthier.

Keep sensory or stim toys around the house. These types of toys can help channel your nervous energy into a healthy distraction so you're better able to focus on tasks that require a lot of brain power.

Prep! If starting the day is hard, lay out your clothes and pack your lunch the night before so you can grab them quickly when the morning comes.

Sources available by downloading the 2023 May is Mental Health Month Toolkit at mhanational.org/may.

If you're taking steps to improve your surroundings at home but are still struggling, you may be experiencing signs of a mental health condition. Take a free, private screening at mhascreening.org to help you figure out what is going on and determine next steps.



WORKSHEET:

SHAPING YOUR HOME ENVIRONMENT



On a scale from 1-10, how satisfied are you with your space?



What do you want to feel when you're in your space? What might you want to change about the space to help create those feelings?

Thinking about your space, what do you already love about it? Write your answers to the prompts below in the heart shapes.

- a. Something that makes you feel happy.
- b. Something that makes you feel cozy.
- c. Something that makes you feel safe.
- d. Something that makes you feel connected.
- e. Something that makes you feel like you.

What do you feel like your space is missing? This can be an item, an overall aesthetic, a feeling, or another factor. Write your answers in the roof of the house.

What are one or two things you can do right away to bring more of what you want into your space? Write your answers in the moving boxes.

A graphic of a house. The roof is a light blue triangle with several dark blue diagonal lines. The base is a pink rectangle containing five white heart shapes arranged in a 2-3 pattern. The hearts are labeled 'a.', 'b.', 'c.', 'd.', and 'e.' respectively. At the bottom center of the pink base is the MHIA Mental Health America logo.

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

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