

CREATING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE: THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Wellness is the active process of becoming aware of and making choices toward a successful existence, both as individuals within society and within the work environment. Wellness enhances physical, mental, and social wellbeing, and in one word, “health.” The workplace is an important setting, not only for health *protection* — to prevent occupational injury — but also health *promotion* —to improve overall health and wellbeing.

Trauma-informed design is about integrating the principles of trauma-informed care into design with the goal of creating physical spaces that promote safety, wellbeing and healing. This requires realizing how the physical environment affects identity, worth, and dignity, and how it promotes empowerment. It requires recognizing that the physical environment has an impact on attitude, mood, and behavior because there is a strong link between our physiological state, our emotional state, and the physical environment. It also means that intentionally designing and maintaining healing environments leads to empowerment and resists retraumatizing those who have already experienced so much trauma.

The principles of trauma-informed design include reducing and removing known adverse stimuli and environmental stresses, actively engaging individuals in a dynamic, multisensory environment, supporting self-reliance, providing and promoting connection to the natural world, reinforcing a sense of personal identity and promoting the opportunity for choice while balancing program needs and the safety and comfort of the majority.

Biophilic design incorporates natural elements into indoor environments. It can enhance mood by reducing stress, improving cognitive function, and increasing feelings of wellbeing. Exposure to nature has been linked to decreased levels of cortisol, improved mood, and increased attention and focus. Biophilic design elements have been found to have similar effects on mood and can improve overall quality of life in indoor spaces.

Some elements of biophilic design include:

- **Natural Light-** Natural light makes rooms appear less crowded, and lower levels of illumination mitigate perceived crowding and the resulting stress and discomfort. Let in as much natural light as possible to boost mood, improve productivity, and help regulate circadian rhythms.
- **Views of Nature-** Keep windows unobstructed to allow views of nature outside.
- **Color-** Choose calming, natural colors. Avoid deeply hued warm colors that may arouse negative emotions.
- **Environmental Features-** Features of the natural world like vegetation, water, and natural materials create a more pleasing visual and tactile experience. Incorporate plants, natural materials and textures such as wood, stone, or bamboo, water features such as a small tabletop fountain or a fish tank. Plants perform an important biophilic function by connecting occupants to the natural world, which has been found to reduce stress and pain, and to improve mood.
- **Natural Shapes, Patterns, and Forms-** Incorporate naturally occurring shapes, patterns, and forms such as botanical motifs, spirals, arches, and curves.

Tips to ensure consistent trauma-informed care and promote a sense of safety, calmness, and productivity:

- **Spatial Layout-** Spaces with clear sightlines and few barriers create a sense of safety and calmness.
- **Balance-** Create visual interest with detail but not overcrowding. An appropriate quantity of objects, symmetry, and regularity in their arrangement alleviates stress and promotes wellbeing.
- **Furnishings-** Furniture should be durable and easy to clean, and its arrangement should enhance safety and promote a positive relationship with staff and other beneficiaries at the organization.
- **Maintenance and Organization-** Workspaces should be clean, maintained, organized, and free of clutter. Items should not be stored on the floor. Avoid clutter of excess resources, materials, supplies, books, etc. Keep out what you need to access frequently and store additional items appropriately. Regularly cleanse supplies, replenish resources, and organize materials.