



How Does Environmental Wellness Relate to Mental Health?

Approximately 23 percent (or 12.6 million) of worldwide deaths are due to modifiable environmental conditions like built environments, including housing, workplaces, and roads, and air, water, and soil pollution.¹ Environmental conditions are closely related to the social determinants of health. Social determinants are the conditions in the various environments people occupy—where people are born, where they live, work, play, worship, and more—that affect health and quality of life.² Environmental and social determinants of health “are hard to disentangle and hard to measure separately.”³ The physical environment affects levels of stress and fatigue, as well as the availability of social relationships,⁴ which can be particularly crucial for individuals with mental health conditions. Reducing stress and increasing access to social supports are key to recovery and reducing symptomology.

What is the Environmental Dimension of Wellness?

Environmental wellness involves being able to be and feel physically safe in safe and clean surroundings and to be able to access clean air, food, and water. This includes both our micro-environment (the places where we live, learn, work, etc.) and our macro-environment (our communities, our country, and the planet). Services and supports can help people to create living, learning, and working spaces that promote learning, contemplation, and relaxation.⁵

Attention to the Inside and Outside Environments

Environments include places like home, school, work or volunteer location, community, planet, and nature. All of these environments have the potential to positively or negatively impact overall health and well-being. Studies indicate that spending time in nature is an “underutilized (and perhaps unknown)” health promotion strategy. Ensuring that people experience time outside (e.g., at parks, beaches, forests, farms, lakes, rivers, gardens) can lower stress, improve mood, and enhance overall well-being.⁶ Nature is one of many environments that can support environmental wellness.

Encouraging Environmental Wellness

To support the environmental wellness of those they serve, providers can consider these environmental components in treatment and service settings. They can also encourage individuals served to consider these components in their home and work settings:

- Keep the environment clean—organized spaces can “help ease stress and anxiety, as well as promote stronger decision-making skills”⁷
- Make sure the environment is safe—identify and address occupational hazards and create supportive environments that are inclusive for all abilities⁸
- Ensure the environment is accessible—make a physically accessible space⁹ that is trauma-informed¹⁰ and culturally competent¹¹ for service delivery

Environmental Wellness Impacts Other Dimensions of Wellness

Environmental wellness can impact other dimensions of wellness, including occupational, physical, and emotional wellness.

Occupational Wellness

Environments can influence whether people feel more or less focused and productive. Studies show that comprehensive health promotion and wellness programs that benefit mental health include: “regular sharing focus groups, social networking, monthly personal stories from leadership using webinars and multi-media communications, expert-led workshops, lunch-and-learn sessions, and manager and employee training.”¹² Providers can encourage individuals to get involved in work (or volunteer, school, etc.) environments that are designed to promote mental health. Providers can also help people to collaborate with their supervisors to structure their work environments so they can complete assigned tasks effectively and safely. This can involve inquiring about available reasonable accommodations, which may include using noise-canceling headphones, decorating a workspace, or establishing a flexible schedule.

Physical Wellness

Environments affect a person’s access to things like clean water and air¹³ and healthy whole foods, which impact their physical wellness. For example, low-income communities and communities of color often lack fresh food options and instead have more fast food options available. These unhealthy foods are often associated with obesity and chronic disease.¹⁴ Providers can help individuals to find out where there are places to access fresh, locally grown produce. They can also encourage the people they serve to get outdoors to engage in more physical activity, or even host events or support groups that include exercise like walking or chair yoga.

Emotional Wellness

Studies indicate that “higher levels of neighborhood green space [are] associated with significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress...Results suggest that “greening” could be a potential population health improvement strategy...”¹⁵ Providers can encourage individuals served to increase their time outdoors. They can also encourage people to decorate spaces in their home, room, or workspace with plants to improve their emotional and environmental wellness. Decorating and organizing a space can help avoid things getting lost, as well as accidental falls. A clean and organized home or work space can promote safety and well-being.



Remember: the wellness approach to recovery offers a holistic framework in which people are viewed as whole human beings.¹⁶ Whether working toward effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, or service delivery, keep the Eight Dimensions of Wellness and the value of environmental wellness in mind when serving individuals with mental health conditions.

Relevant Resources

[Environmental Wellness Toolkit](#) | National Institutes of Health

[Wellness Institute Publications](#) | Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey

[Creating a Healthier Life Handbook](#) | Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

[Feng Shui for Health and Energy](#) | CVS

[Environmental Health](#) | Healthy People 2020

[Epigenetics](#) | PBS NOVA scienceNOW

[Recreational Places and Activities](#) | Recreation.gov

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Endnotes

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