

## Our Environment

We are affected by the world around us—the change of seasons, the weather, our neighborhoods, and the places and spaces where spend our time.



In this issue, we look at *environmental wellness*, which includes our living, learning, working, and playing spaces, as well as the larger communities where we participate as citizens. Being able to be and feel physically secure, in safe and clean surroundings, with access clean air, food, and water, provides a basic foundation for environmental wellness. An abundance of research and personal experiences tells us that good health is possible when you are in environments that are safe, pleasant and organized. Emotional, intellectual and other wellness can be enhanced when you find places and spaces that promote learning and contemplation and that elicit the relaxation response.<sup>1</sup> Environment wellness is often a challenge for people with mental health and substance use challenges, and for people who experience trauma and homelessness.

### Earth Day: April 22, 2018

According to Earth Day Network ([www.earthday.org](http://www.earthday.org)), this annual event is a day of political action and civic participation. People march, sign petitions, meet with their elected officials, plant trees, and clean up their towns and roads. Corporations and governments use it to make pledges and announce sustainability measures. Worldwide, various events are held to demonstrate support for environmental protection. First celebrated in 1970, Earth Day events in more than 193 countries are now coordinated globally by the Earth Day Network. Many environmental issues continue today, including reducing air and water pollution, preserving green space, and building communities that promote health, like having safe and attractive places to walk. Many of these issues are being addressed by advocacy groups. If you are concerned about your community or our larger world, consider volunteering.

## Trauma-Informed Environments

While many readers may be familiar with a trauma-informed approach, knowledge of the importance of trauma informed spaces (*environments*) is not as common. A research review<sup>ii</sup> identified several issues relevant to designing physical environments for people who have experienced trauma. These include safety, privacy, and control, such as being able to rearrange the furniture or post your preferred wall decorations. Colors affect people, too. The review reports that “warm colors (red, orange, yellow) can cause arousal, while cool colors (blue, green, purple) have a calming effect.” Plants, music, and views of nature can reduce stress, along with some soft surfaces that absorb sound, preventing a harsh and noisy environment. Open and uncluttered spaces contribute to feeling calm. Public spaces and service settings need clear signs providing directions and location information. Service providers, peer providers, and other supporters should be mindful of how to best create trauma-informed environments for unique needs and personal and cultural preferences.



To evaluate your service setting, use the assessment tool at [https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/about-us/TIC\\_Environmental\\_Scan.pdf](https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/about-us/TIC_Environmental_Scan.pdf)

## Environmental Wellness

We have offered a few environmental wellness ideas.

### Get outside!

Nature has great healing powers for many people. If the weather is bad, spend some time looking out the window and reflect on the awesome power of a storm.

If you don't have easy access to nature's beauty, find a substitute—photographs, nature sounds on a phone app, a travel video, or even adding a houseplant.



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### Add beauty!

Have things that you enjoy where you can see them. Make a space for display on a wall or table so that the thing you love stands out and catches your eye. A flower, a favorite book, a postcard, or a special souvenir can bring a smile to your face. Consider changing your special object every month or every season to renew your interest and avoid clutter. Many beautiful things can be found at thrift shops and local markets.

### Reduce clutter!

When you spend time in a place crowded by things lying about in an untidy mess, you may feel overwhelmed or anxious. Piles of unsorted paper may result in late or missing bill payments or losing important account information.

### Clean!

Feeling overwhelmed by how much clutter is in your house, car, or office?

Pick one small area, then set a timer for 5 minutes, or put on your favorite song, and start to clean or organize until time's up. You may be surprised how much you can do in a short time.



Some examples of quick clean-ups are: scrape and stack the dirty dishes to wash later; bag up the trash; put old newspapers, magazines, and junk mail in a pile or bag for recycling; sweep the kitchen; put away some clean laundry; or scrub the bathroom sink. If you're up to it, work for another 5-minute cycle or through a few more songs. Even a small amount of cleaning can make a difference in how things look and how you feel.

### Take a break!

Find or create a space where you can reflect quietly. Mindfulness includes awareness of the space around you.

### Clean your car!

If you have a car, keeping it clean can help preserve its value, remove distractions, and even prevent accidents from rolling items or loose objects flying through the air during a sudden stop.<sup>iii</sup> Food particles in your car can attract insects and mice, just like in your home or other indoor spaces.

### Sleep Space!

Since you sleep about one-third of each day, you spend the most time in your bedroom, which is part of your home environment. You also may spend time in a work setting, school, exercise facility, car, and/or a place for spiritual practice. All of these environments affect how you feel. Clutter in your bedroom can make it hard to relax. If possible, keep your computer, work or school papers, and bill-paying files away from where you sleep.

## Environment and Health

We need healthy, safe, and protective environments<sup>iv</sup> to ensure normal growth, development, and well-being. The environment influences health in many ways—through exposure to physical, chemical, and biological risk factors. Environmental exposures can impact many health problems. These include respiratory problems due to air pollution and workplace dust and fumes, workplace accidents, and diseases caused by poor water supplies.

### Asthma

Asthma is a disease that affects the lungs and one of the triggers is air pollution. It causes episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, and coughing. Asthma can be controlled by taking medicine and avoiding the triggers that can cause an attack. People with asthma are affected differently by different triggers, including cold air, stress, and respiratory infections. Here are some common environmental factors that can make your asthma worse.

**Dust mites** are found in bedding, rugs, and soft furniture. Vacuuming often can help, especially if you have access to a vacuum with a very fine filter (often labeled as "HEPA"). Mattress and pillow cases designed for allergy control also can be helpful.

**Pets** can be a source of allergy—it's their dander, not their hair that is the culprit.<sup>v</sup> Keeping the pet out of the bedroom and regular pet baths can help, but may not solve the problem. If you think you might have a pet allergy, ask your doctor for an allergy test before you decide to re-home your pet.

**Smoke** can aggravate asthma and other respiratory conditions. Smoking is worst, but second-hand smoke is also a common trigger, along with fireplace or woodstove smoke. Third-hand smoke (in clothes, furniture, and cars) can be a problem for many people, too. Tobacco smoke is especially risky for children.

**Cockroaches** can cause asthma and allergy through a protein found in their waste and body parts, so even dead ones can trigger an attack.<sup>vi</sup>

**Mold** may be difficult to detect. Sometimes you can smell it or see it on bathroom fixtures or other damp places, but it also can be hiding in drains, under sinks, in carpets, and even inside walls. Cleaning and ventilating will help, along with keeping the humidity low (between 35% and 50%).<sup>vii</sup> You can get an inexpensive humidity meter (called a hygrometer) that looks like, or comes with, a thermometer.

## Assessing Your Wellness

Take a closer look at your own wellness, using *Wellness in 8 Dimensions* and other tools available for free from [www.cspnj.org](http://www.cspnj.org) (double click on the Resources tab).

Environmental Wellness involves being and feeling physically safe, in safe and clean surroundings, and being able to access clean air, food, and water, in the spaces where you live, work, and play like your home, neighborhood, job, and community as well as your country and planet. Try the Environmental Wellness Self-Assessment in the box on this page. ↗

Check out our complete  
**Wellness Inventory.**

Double-click on the  
"resources" tab at  
[www.cspnj.org](http://www.cspnj.org)

### Rate Your Environmental Wellness

Use this scale:

- 4 If the item is **Always True** for you
  - 3 If the item is **Sometimes True** for you
  - 2 If the item is **Rarely True** for you
  - 1 If the item is **Never True** for you
- I regularly clean my living environment.
- I make use of sunlight, fresh air, and/or live plants.
- I discard garbage regularly and clean spoiled foods out of the refrigerator.
- I keep my work/home space clean and /or organized.
- I conserve energy (such as heating, electricity, water, and fuel).
- I recycle (including glass, paper, plastic, metal, clothing, and furniture).
- I do not litter.
- I set aside time to enjoy nature.
- I set aside time to reflect quietly.
- I participate in community garden activities, cleaning events, and other activities, such as neighborhood watches.

**Your Total Score** (out of a possible **40**): \_\_\_\_\_

### Self-Assessment Scoring Key:

- 🌱 If you scored from 29 to 40 points, that's excellent! Your environment and habits are contributing to your wellness.
- 🌱 If you scored from 14 to 28 points, you're doing great though you can look over the items again and see if there are areas you want to improve.
- 🌱 If you scored from 0 to 13 points, review your responses, to see if there is one area you may want to improve, read over some of the tips in this issue of Words of Wellness. What is one things you may want to do? Build on what you are already doing well.

## Send us your ideas!

Each month, throughout 2018, we will explore different wellness dimensions, resources, and topics. In the next few issues, we are planning to address emotional wellness, financial wellness, and occupational wellness. Please send questions, comments and suggestions on these topics and on other wellness areas. (See *contact information below*)

## References for this issue

<sup>i</sup> Benson, H., & Klipper, M. Z. (1976). *The relaxation response*. NY: Harper Collins.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://designresourcesforhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/FINAL1\\_8\\_2017.pdf](http://designresourcesforhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/FINAL1_8_2017.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> MIG Insurance (<https://www.miginsurance.ca/resources/spring-cleaning-the-dangers-of-a-messy-car>)

<sup>iv</sup> See <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/healthyhomes.htm> and [http://www.who.int/quantifying\\_ehimpacts/publications/preventing-disease/en/](http://www.who.int/quantifying_ehimpacts/publications/preventing-disease/en/)

<sup>v</sup> See the Allergy and Asthma Foundation of America: <http://www.aafa.org/page/pet-dog-cat-allergies.aspx>

<sup>vi</sup> See <http://www.aafa.org/page/cockroach-allergy.aspx>

<sup>vii</sup> See <http://www.aafa.org/page/mold-allergy.aspx>

# Happy Earth Day

