

Patient Space: Creating a Comfortable Climate Post Acute Care

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Numerous research studies point to the impact of our physical environment on our general life outlook and ability to heal. But why then, are most clinical settings so stiff, cold and uninviting? If aesthetics play an important role in a person's overall mood and well-being, what can hospitals and healthcare systems do to create a warmer and friendlier environment, especially for acutely ill patients? What can family members and caregivers offer the patient to help him on the road to recovery?

As a former severely ill patient, I'd like to share some ideas with you.

Create a clean space

Hospital cleaning staff were among the kindest people I encountered while in the intensive care unit. Their job can be a thankless one, and I have fond memories of individuals in charge of cleaning my room and greeting me with a smile - even when I was unable to respond.

Keeping a hospital room clean is essential in reducing further or additional illness. This makes the job of the hospital cleaning staff so important.

At home, eliminating clutter or unnecessary items creates a more serene environment. In case you are taking care of an ill loved one at home, keep only what he/she needs beside them. Tissues, fresh water, extra blankets and soft pillows are always welcome to have nearby. On the other hand, old newspapers, dirty dishes and overall clutter clog the mind and create unrest for the patient.

Bring the outside in

When kept indoors for a prolonged period of time, human beings tend to start craving to see, smell, touch, taste and hear elements of nature.

I remember mouthing (as I was on mechanical ventilation) that I wanted to go outside during my extended stay in the ICU. To my disappointment, I was constantly told that I was too immune-suppressed to be exposed to the outside world.

One day, my nurse Frank came to take me to a routine CT scan. After the scan, he wheeled my gurney down an unfamiliar hallway and opened a large set of black double doors that led onto the loading dock of the hospital. He pushed me into the sun, removed the blanket on my legs and stood next to me. Those were definitely the best five minutes during my long stay in the ICU - and a story I never tire of recounting again and again.

In the intensive care unit, I was unable to receive flowers from visitors (this is the policy in many acute care settings). In that case, visual aids such as a photo or television screen showing soothing images of beaches, mountains, flowers or gardens would be a helpful substitute. Whenever possible, open the curtains to let the sunshine in.

At home, fresh touches such as flowers or plants are beautiful to look at and can immediately uplift the mood. If living flowers or plants aren't an option, faux florals and plants or picturesque photos or paintings would fit the bill.

Fresh air works wonders for the mind and spirit. Allow some time for the patient to go outside or stay by a doorway or window to breathe in the cool breeze or feel the warmth of the sun. Serving medication or food on nice fancy plates, glassware and glass straws will make an ill person feel special.



Cultivate a culture of comfort and love

I remember being constantly cold when I was hospitalized. I was extremely grateful when offered warm blankets, but they were given infrequently. Apart from blankets, foam and air mattress covers are especially helpful to patients during long hospital stays and, in my opinion, should be made available by hospitals.

Color plays a huge role in soothing nerves and inspiring peace and should be used more deliberately. Birthing rooms in hospitals, for instance, are designed in such a way that allows a woman in labor to welcome her new baby in a warm and welcoming environment. It would be wonderful if EDs and intensive care units could follow suit. Soft, relaxing music, comfortable places for a patient’s visitors to sit - these would be wonderful additions to the otherwise cold and impersonal vibe in hospitals.

Placing photos and cards sent by loved ones on a bulletin board where a patient can readily see them can be so comforting. I remember when I was ill - and my children were 6, 7 and 9 - the cards and posters they made and sent gave me the motivation and inspiration to get well. I still have them today and still love looking at them.

Here are some much-appreciated ways to create an environment that is comfortable and conducive to healing at home: providing enough soft blankets, pillows and throws to help regulate body temperature, preparing a seating area for visitors (assuming your loved one can have guests), creating a warm and peaceful ambiance through the use of battery-operated candles or soft lighting, and playing soft, relaxing music.

Photos of loved ones, whether humans or even pets, serve as great reminders of the important people in your life and how much you are loved. These help provide hope and inspiration as you heal.





Be kind

Patients always remember the medical staff that took the time to relate to them as human beings, rather than simply as an ill patient. Find ways to show kindness to a patient with a thoughtful question or comment that shows you care. It's so easy to get wrapped up in the day- to-day duties of taking care of extremely ill patients that we can forget to share a kind word or thought.

If a relative or friend is ill, take time to show love and thoughtfulness with cards and letters. It will cheer up any individual. It is easier now than ever, with online services (like Caring Bridges) that allow people to connect and send updates and messages about the status of a loved one's health. Oftentimes, patients can participate on these platforms as well.

Ultimately, healing takes place in many ways, shapes and forms. Our physical environment is one of the many ways we can inspire ourselves and others to improve our health and theirs, uplift the emotions, and feel stronger.

Creating a comfortable space for patients in acute care settings has its inherent limits. However, some of these ideas and small touches can be incorporated into the care we provide to the seriously ill. At home, the challenge is a less complex one. Based on my firsthand experience, I can assure you that improving the physical environment is very much worth it - and these seemingly small touches can really make all the difference.

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