

An Introduction to Surroundings for Integrative Health

When I think about my Whole Health, what is involved in “Surroundings”?

The term "Surroundings" covers a lot of things. It involves everything around you that can affect your health and well-being. This handout will help you think about

1. Your home—page 1
2. Your workplace—page 2
3. Your neighborhood—page 2
4. Experiences that affect your emotions—page 3
5. Climate and the environment—page 4.

You can choose to review all five areas or one or more areas that especially interest you.

How much can surroundings impact my health?

Your surroundings can have a major effect on your health. Even when you are not thinking about it, your surroundings are impacting your health. Your surroundings can affect how happy or sad you feel. They can give you feelings of confidence and hope or help cause you to feel depressed. They can also encourage or discourage bad habits. Identical twins have the same genes. Yet, one can get a chronic (long-lasting) disease and the other may not. Why? The answer in part is their surroundings.¹ (Other reasons may include other areas of self-care, such as food and drink, movement, and sleep). One twin may spend more time in the sun or smoke-filled places. Maybe one lives or works where chemicals or asbestos have been used. Perhaps one has had much more stress than the other or has been better able to manage stress. This information learned from twins is good news. It means that you can give yourself a better chance of being healthier if you pay attention to your surroundings.

What should I pay attention to in my surroundings?

Nobody has perfect surroundings for themselves all of the time. But you may be able to improve your health or prevent accidents by making adjustments to some of your surroundings, as you are able. You might want to think about one or more of the five areas listed below. As you read through the questions in these sections, see if there are any that you want to focus on to be happier, healthier, and safer.

1. Your home

Examples of questions to think about: (There are many more.)

- Where do you live? Do you own your home? Are you homeless? If so, where do you spend your time? Where would you like to live?
- Do you feel safe in your home (or where you spend time if you are homeless)?

- Do you have clean air and water?
- Do you have a smoke detector?
- Given the age and location of your home, is lead, radon, or asbestos a concern?
- Are there firearms in your home? Are they stored safely in a locked area?
- How much clutter is in your home?
- Do you open curtains or blinds to allow the sun to shine in?
- Do you open windows during nice weather to allow in fresh air?
- How happy do you feel in your home and with your home?
- Is there anything that would make you more comfortable or happier at home?
- If you could move, would you? What would you look for in a new place to live?

If you want to explore this topic further, you may want to see the Whole Health handout [“Assessing Your Surroundings.”](#)

2. Your workplace

Examples of questions to think about: (There are many more.)

- Are you employed? Do you want to be employed? If you're unemployed, but wish to be employed, how discouraged do you feel?
- (Studies have found that people who have been out of work for a long time have a greater chance of developing a long-term illness.² Unemployment can be a result of illness or can cause illness.)
- Do you work indoors or outdoors? If outdoors, what are the weather conditions? If indoors, what is the building like? Are these settings stressful?
- Do you work alone or with others? Is this comfortable for you? Do you enjoy your coworkers?
- How many hours do you usually work? How does this feel? How do your friends and family feel about the number of hours you work?
- How stressed do you usually feel at work?
- Do you have access to windows, courtyards, or patios?
- Is the air in your workplace fresh and pleasant smelling?
- Are you able to set out small plants or artwork?
- Is your job dangerous in any way?
- Do you do some tasks repetitively, for example using your hands and wrists in the same way over and over again?
- Do you take breaks? If no, why not? If yes, what do you do on a break?
- How far do you travel to your workplace? Are you OK with this commute?
- How happy are you with your job and workplace?
- If you could leave for another position, would you do so?

Other Whole Health handouts that you may want to read when you think about your workplace include: 1) [“Assessing Your Surroundings,”](#) 2) [“Ergonomics: Positioning Your Body for Whole Health,”](#) 3) [“Healthy Work Habits: Avoiding Workaholism”](#) and 4) information on rest and relaxation in [“An Introduction to Recharge for Whole Health.”](#)

3. Your neighborhood

Think about the area in which you live. Here are some questions to guide you:

- Do you live in a large city, a small or medium size town, or a rural area?
- How does living in this area affect you? Are you happy, relaxed, and energized in this area? Are you worried or frightened because of crime in your neighborhood? Do you have transportation to get to clinics, entertainment, and places where you can buy healthy food? Do you have neighbors you enjoy and that help each other when needed?
- Are you surrounded by nature? Do you have a yard with trees? Or do you live near a park or other natural area? (A study of over 108,000 women found that those who had more green, growing plants near them were less likely to die earlier, especially from lung problems and cancer.³ A review of 12 studies involving millions of people found that living in areas with higher amounts of green space reduced the likelihood of dying from heart disease.⁴)
- Overall, do you feel comfortable in your neighborhood? Or would you rather live in a different setting? What would that look like?

4. Experiences that affect your emotions

This type of surrounding involves anything that affects your emotional well-being. Being aware of your emotions is really important. When you're in touch with your emotions, you can learn what is triggering them. You can then take action to help yourself. This might involve changing a situation, your behavior, or the way you think. Learning to acknowledge and name your emotions can take time. You may want to consider getting help and support from a professional or trusted family member or friend as you do this.

All of us experience stress. Some stress is even good for us. It can energize us, help us get things done, and add spice to life. But stress becomes concerning when it is strong and lasts a long time. It is also concerning if the stressor hurts you in other ways, such as abuse.

Research gives us some helpful information about health and emotions. In general, people who are more optimistic have better physical health.⁵ People who are kind and compassionate tend to have better well-being, are happier, healthier and live longer.⁶ But this is not the case if they are overwhelmed by their helping tasks.

The following questions can help guide your thoughts around your emotions:

- In general, are your emotions positive (e.g., happy, grateful), negative (e.g., angry, resentful) or neutral (neither real positive nor negative)?
- What experiences cause you to feel negative emotions? How often does this happen?
- Think about the people you are around most often. What are their emotions like usually? How do you feel when you are around them?
- Do you have a companion animal? If so, how do you feel about the animal? If you don't have an animal, would you like one?
- Are you being physically or emotionally abused?

- Has abuse or violence happened to you in the past? Do you still feel strong emotions about these experiences?
- Do you feel strong emotions about any of your military experiences? How often does this happen?
- How do you feel about your responsibilities at home?
- How much do you laugh?
- To what extent do you forgive people when they have wronged you?
- What things are you doing for others that make you feel really good yourself?
- How do you feel about reading or listening to local or world news? Are you a news junkie, or does news really upset you? (We hear 17 times more negative news than positive news.⁷)

Don't hesitate to talk to your health care team if you have concerns about your emotional health. It is an important part of your Whole Health.

Other Whole Health handouts that you may want to read when you think about experiences that affect your emotions include: 1) "[The Healing Power of Hope and Optimism](#)," 2) "[Create a Gratitude Practice](#)," 3) "[Laughter Heals](#)," 4) "[Forgiveness](#)," and 5) "[Too Much Bad News: How to Do an Information Fast](#)."

5. Climate and the environment

The climate where you live and the environment around you can also affect your health. Here are a few questions you may want to think about:

- In what part of the country do you live? Consider the following:
 - Is it too hot at times?
 - Is it too cold and/or icy at times?
 - Are you in the sun enough, so that your body can make enough Vitamin D? (Anyone living in the northern part of the United States may not be getting enough Vitamin D from the sun.)
 - Are you at risk for skin cancers because of the intensity of the sun and how much time you are in it?
 - Is the area prone to flooding and the effects of flooding? Are you around mold?
 - Do you live in an area that is at risk for wildfires?
 - Do you have symptoms of seasonal affective disorder in winter? (This is depression triggered by less sunlight.)
 - Is there a lot of air pollution?
 - Do you own your own well? If so, do you have it tested to make sure it is safe?
 - Do you live in an area that triggers allergies?
 - What animals or pests pose health risks in your area?
- Everyone is exposed to thousands of toxins. Are there some that you especially come in contact with in your area? How can you lower the amount of toxins you come in contact with?

- What did you come in contact with during your military service? Agent Orange or other chemical weapons? Biological weapons? Radiation? Do you have shrapnel in your body?

What should I do if I become aware of something unhealthy in my surroundings?

We all have some things in our surroundings that aren't ideal. Consider if anything you identified as unhealthy is something you want or need to modify right now. Then consider ways you can make changes. Is this something you want to discuss with a member of your health care team? Sometimes changes are large, such as moving or leaving your job. Many times you can make smaller changes that will make a difference in your life. For example, if you're concerned about unclean water in your apartment, can you approach your property owner? Are you able to buy bottled water until the issue is resolved? Another example: it may not be practical for you to move to a different part of the country if you're depressed in winter. But you may be able to use bright light therapy, friends, companion animals, and other things you enjoy to help you feel better until spring.

If I want to change something in my surroundings, what is a good way to set a goal?

Consider writing a SMART goal. SMART stands for

- **Specific:** what exactly will you do?
- **Measurable:** how much and how often will you do it?
- **Action-oriented:** what action will you take?
- **Realistic:** is this a goal you can achieve?
- **Timed:** when will you start and when will you end?

Anyone can set a SMART goal. It just takes some practice and patience with oneself. Start with a small goal—one that you feel confident you can do. Here's an example. A man who does not smoke wants to spend less time in smoky places. He usually meets friends, who smoke, three nights a week. He decides to meet with his friends in the usual location two nights a week. On the third night, he will invite them to his apartment where they do not smoke. He will do this for two weeks starting tomorrow. At the end of two weeks, he will decide if he wants to continue this goal, increase the time in a non-smoking setting to two nights a week, or change his goal.

When setting a goal, ask yourself the following questions:

- What might get in the way of accomplishing your plan?
- How will you work around that difficulty?

If you set a goal and don't reach it, try again. You may need to set a smaller goal. Then as you have success, you can reach for a larger goal. If you don't succeed, you may want to try a different goal. You can always come back to the first one at a later time.

For you to consider:

- Do one or more of the five types of surroundings jump out at you as needing your attention? If so, which ones?
- What, in particular, concerns you?
- How will you begin to make a change? What is your first goal?
- What small thing can you do today to improve your surroundings?
- Do you want help from a member of your health care team for this issue? Is there a family member or friend you trust to talk with you about this issue?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of Integrative Health handouts on your surroundings	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Environmental Working Group	Large variety of information to empower you to live a healthier life in a healthier environment	http://www.ewg.org/

Author(s)

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Charlene Luchterhand MSSW, Education and Research Coordinator, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a document for clinicians, "Passport to Whole Health: A Personal Health Planning Reference Manual," written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

References

1. Salguero M. Environment and gene expression. In: Rakel D, ed. Integr Med. 2nd ed. Saunders, an imprint of Elsevier, Inc.; 2007:23-30.
2. Herbig B, Dragano N, Angerer P. Health in the long-term unemployed. Dtsch Arztebl Int. Jun 2013;110(23-24):413-9. doi:10.3238/arztebl.2013.0413
3. James P, Hart JE, Banay RF, Laden F. Exposure to greenness and mortality in a nationwide prospective cohort study of women. Environ Health Perspect. Sep 2016;124(9):1344-1352. doi:10.1289/ehp.1510363
4. Gascon M, Triguero-Mas M, Martinez D, et al. Residential green spaces and mortality: a systematic review. Environ Int. Jan 2016;86:60-7. doi:10.1016/j.envint.2015.10.013



5. Rasmussen HN, Scheier MF, Greenhouse JB. Optimism and physical health: a meta-analytic review. *Ann Behav Med.* Jun 2009;37(3):239-56. doi:10.1007/s12160-009-9111-x
6. Post SG. Altruism, happiness, and health: it's good to be good. *Int J Behav Med.* 2005;12(2):66-77. doi:10.1207/s15327558ijbm1202_4
7. Williams RB. Why we love bad news more than good news. 11/1/14. Accessed 9/21/16, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201411/why-we-love-bad-news-more-good-news>