

# *A Healthy Aging Home Environment*

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Whether aging-in-place, living in a senior housing unit, or residing in an assisted-living facility, your home environment, where you spend the majority of your time, should be the kind of place that gives you the joy, peace, and comfort you expect and deserve.

There are 10 important characteristics of a healthy and holistic aging environment. These include safety and security, personal control, sensory stimulation, privacy, continuity of self, social interactions, functional independence, meaningful activity, spirituality, and architectural delight.

**Safety and security:** Your home not only offers you shelter and protection from the environmental elements of wind, rain, snow, and a blazing hot sun, but also provides fortification and safety against crime. The physical and mental health of older adults is influenced by the neighborhood characteristics where he or she resides. Residing in a location that is pleasing to the senses (sight, sound, smell), as well as, safe and accessible to nearby amenities is the ideal that is not readily available to all of the elderly population.

Living in squalor and neglected neighborhoods is the unfortunate norm for many elderly. Neighborhood poverty is predictive of many elderly negative health perceptions.<sup>[4]</sup> Because of the influence of the social environment on elderly health and well-being neighborhood characteristics should be taken into consideration in developing community-based aging policies.<sup>[4]</sup> Precisely how the geographical and physical characteristics of lived environments contribute to cognitive aging are not adequately understood at this time.<sup>[1]</sup> Future research will hopefully shed more light on this topic.

There are additional fundamentals and features of a safe home environment. Your house should not make you sick or contribute to your current illness. Air quality should be free from mold, mildew, pest infestations, excessive dust and dirt, toxic chemicals, sprays, additives, cleansers, and even unwarranted loud noise. Some individuals may be more sensitive to particular environmental contexts than others

depending on over-all health and preexisting illness, as well as genetic factors that together facilitate (or mitigate) physical and mental changes.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Functional independence:** Well-designed home efficiency requires your environment to be structured in such a way that the floor plan and design layout for furniture, appliances, and even sufficient and suitable light fixtures are supportive of your specific abilities as well as specific limitations. The immediate indoor and outdoor physical environments should be uncluttered and in no way impede mobility or obstruct access to pathways or entrance/exits. Orientation in the context of home environment should consider both spatial and temporal aspects.<sup>[6]</sup>

Spatial memory is required to navigate through your home environment. Knowing where each object is relative to other objects provides us with cues and navigational directions in our environment. Knowing where to put things used, (back into their rightful spot so that when you need it at a later date), helps you readily find it without the frustration of having to search each time you need the item. Knowing where things are or where they belong, because that is the allotted space you have designated, is necessary for home organization and orderliness.

Temporal orientation is related to time. It goes beyond knowing just the calendar day or the current hour. It is an awareness and knowing when and how often to take your medicine and at what times. It is experiential knowledge and performance of the sequential or progressive steps necessary to carry out your activities of daily living.

Life space autonomy has a potential moderating role for personal control beliefs. An internal control belief about your personal environment is reflected in feelings of competence and a sense of personal agency.<sup>[8]</sup> Attributions of one's environment being under external control imply a sense of dependency and passivity. Functional independence is better maintained in the framework of adequate life space autonomy. Measures of everyday function and the cognitive domains of memory, reasoning, and processing speed are significantly associated with life space. Research finds that older adults with better cognitive function have a larger overall functional life space.<sup>[8]</sup>

**Sensory stimulation:** Cognition mediates age-related changes in the elderly person's ability to monitor their environment.<sup>[3]</sup> Stimulating environments foster cognitive vitality in older age. Older adults tend to depend on information that is present in their environment rather than rely on their memory. In many real-world situations, we have a choice of either using our automatic retrieval from memory to guide our behavior or we can instead search the environment for cues about how to respond or what to do next.<sup>[5]</sup> Frequent use of memory supports fluent and self-assured behavior. Using only the environment to direct your behavior is a slower, more deliberate pattern of action. Numerous studies show that advancing age brings not only a decrement in basic processing capacities, but also a shift toward a greater reliance on external rather than internal information.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Meaningful activity:** Your environment should meet your needs, give you a sense of control over the immediate area, and allow you to easily perform your activities of daily living. Your home environment should support your abilities to engage in hobbies and pursuits that bring you joy and a sense of accomplishment. Meaningful activity is important at all ages. You can continue many of your hobbies throughout the progression of aging. You have to make some necessary adjustments—mentally and physically, using alternative techniques and assistive tools as necessary.

Even as you age, you should continue to occasionally try new activities or gain new skills to enhance what you already know or can do. You can also develop new or alternative interests. This is a way to keep the mind, body, and spirit engaged to the fullest. This enhances overall well-being and keeps you more involved with life.

**Social interaction:** Environmental experiences and contexts (many if not most of which we actively select), are important for cognitive maintenance and may set courses toward better or worse cognitive maintenance in late life.<sup>[7]</sup> Socially stimulating environments are very important to aging well. Your lived environment has a bearing on your social interactions and whether you engage in an active or passive lifestyle. These factors in turn work together to dampen or enhance your cognition. Evidence of higher prevalence of dementia in rural rather than urban contexts suggests that urban environments may be more stimulating either cognitively, socially, or in terms of lifestyle.<sup>[1]</sup>

**Privacy:** Privacy is the ability of an individual to separate, remove, withdraw, or seclude self. Privacy is respect of the boundaries of personal space and personal information. Interactions with others, presenting aspects of self to the public and self-disclosure is therefore express selectively. The boundaries and content of what is considered private is particular to each individual.

Privacy is the state of being apart from other people at your own discretion. It is the solitude or seclusion that you choose at certain times in your life. Privacy also refers to your factual or personal expectation of discrete actions and activity. Your home environment, whether it is a mansion or a single room, ideally offers optimal opportunity and space for maximum personal privacy. The ability to step back from public view, from your public self, and to nurture your private self is essential to well-being and a sense of autonomy. Confidentiality, discretion, solitude, and seclusion are at the heart of privacy.

**Personal control:** Having a sense of control over your personal life is an essential element of well-being. It is a belief in self-efficacy that allows confidence and a sense of direction and order in a personal environment such as your home. There is a relationship between cognition and functional measures with home environment or life space for older adults. Life space is a measure of spatial mobility and the extent of movement within the aged person's environment.<sup>[8]</sup> Understanding the relationship between social, psychological and physical environment and various aging processes is germane to the elderly person's autonomy as well as community concepts and social initiatives of 'aging-in-place'.<sup>[1]</sup>

Your sense of personal control is a belief that you can master, control, and shape many if not most of the features of home and phases of your life. Its opposite is the internal sense of powerlessness from being under the dominating control of external influences of life circumstances, family, institutional setting, or a constricted and inadequate environment.

**Continuity of self:** Your psychological, emotional and cognitive environment should be one of peace and serenity, hobbies and enjoyable activities. It is augmented with good food, good music, abundant family and pleasant friends. Although most elderly are able to enjoy many aspects of their home environment,

an uncounted number of elderly exist in either isolated or even dysfunctional home environments.

Isolation may come from living in a rural location that is too far from family and community services. Isolation may also be the result of lack of physical mobility as a result of illness, lack of transportation, and insufficient social interactions. Isolation may also come from the elderly person lacking the social skills necessary for successful positive interactions when he/she engages in a social setting. They gradually withdraw from social exchanges and neglect former friend connections. Isolated home environments, as well as dysfunctional home environments that are undergirded with stress and strife with others living in the home, are anathema to elderly well-being and exacerbate chronic health conditions.

**Spirituality** is an essential life resource for many elderly as they navigate the challenges of aging in the context of physical and other life domain changes. Spirituality has historically served to help us adjust to life stressors, cope with life losses, and accept the inevitability of death. The home environment influences the perceived severity of stressors that are experienced in daily life. The influence of unique environments on perceived stress exerts a stronger influence on older adults in comparison to younger adults.<sup>[2]</sup> Spiritual habits and traditions are integral aspects to aging for many elderly people. Spiritual practices such as prayer or other rituals are often observed or performed on daily in many elderly homes.

**Architectural delight** posits there is beauty in your surrounding environment that you have regular opportunity to appreciate and enjoy. Being present within the context of your environment should bring joy, peace, gratitude and a smile. It is pure joy to sit and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee in the morning while looking out the window. To go outside into a garden is a delight.

Multiple factors influence aging well. Maintaining cognitive health is a crucial aspect to living competently, resourcefully, and independently. Living efficiently for as long as possible is key to aging-in-place. Identifying those individual and environmental influences on cognitive aging, and cognitive vitality will provide researchers, care providers, and communities with the opportunities to enhance aging and elderly well-being. The fundamental dynamics of health, well-being and cognition are affected by genes and environments, lifestyle choices, exercise and

nutrition, as well as disease and disability. All these facets act and interact across your life course as well as within and across developmental periods to determine your own particular physical and cognitive aging outcome.

In summary, a healthy home environment is safe and secure, allows the aged individual to exercise independence of function, is supportive of personal autonomy, stimulates the senses, offers fun activities that are mentally, physically, and spiritually stimulation, and encourages social engagements.

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