



SHAPING SPACES FOR HEALING AND DIGNITY

Top 5 Trends in Behavioral Health Design

“By embracing destigmatization, humanization, safety-consciousness, patient-centeredness, and innovative outpatient design principles, behavioral health facilities are **transforming** into spaces of healing and hope.”

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spotlight on behavioral health has never been brighter. The unprecedented strain on individuals’ mental well-being has sparked a profound shift in attitudes and trends within the realm of behavioral health design. As societal awareness grows and funding increases, designers are tasked with reimagining spaces that prioritize safety, dignity, and healing.

Here are 5 significant changes reshaping the landscape of behavioral health design in the United States.

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1. RISING IMPORTANCE OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical need for accessible and effective behavioral health care. From heightened stress and anxiety to exacerbated substance abuse issues, the pandemic has magnified existing challenges and brought them to the forefront of public discourse.

Furthermore, societal issues such as mass shootings have spotlighted the intersection of mental health and public safety, reinforcing the urgency of comprehensive behavioral health solutions. Consequently, there has been a notable increase in funding and resources allocated to address these issues in various states, marking a significant departure from past neglect. This newfound attention has spurred a reevaluation of behavioral health facilities’ design and functionality, emphasizing the importance of creating environments conducive to healing and recovery.

2. HUMANIZING SPACES THROUGH DESTIGMATIZATION AND DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Historically, behavioral health facilities have been associated with a sterile and institutional atmosphere, evoking feelings of confinement rather than healing. However, contemporary design trends prioritize destigmatization and de-institutionalization, aiming to create spaces that promote dignity and comfort.

One key focus is the incorporation of calming elements such as soothing colors, natural textures, and ample daylight.

Biophilic design principles, which integrate natural elements into built environments, are increasingly utilized to harness the therapeutic benefits of nature. Additionally, environmental graphic design plays a crucial role in humanizing spaces, with murals, biophilic themes, and expressive materials like chalk and dry erase fostering a sense of connection and self-expression.

By steering away from traditional institutional aesthetics, designers aim to cultivate environments that convey warmth and support, signaling to patients that they are valued and deserving of ca

3. BALANCING SAFETY WITH NON-INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Ensuring the safety of both patients and caregivers remains paramount in behavioral health design. However, there is a growing recognition of the need to balance safety measures with a more inviting and non-institutional aesthetic. Designers are implementing innovative approaches to address safety concerns while avoiding the fortress-like appearance of traditional facilities. This includes the creation of staff-only areas for decompression and retreat. The integration of anti-ligature design features to minimize risks to patients will always be needed, but designers are getting creative about fixtures that incorporate these safety elements without looking completely foreign or institutional. Furniture selection also plays a critical role in safety, with designs ranging from sturdy and immovable to lightweight and non-threatening. In the past, these fixtures were often the same industrial designs used in prisons, but furniture designers are becoming more creative about furnishings that meet safety needs while still having a higher degree of design aesthetic and comfort.

By prioritizing safety without compromising on aesthetics, you can foster an environment of trust and healing, where individuals feel empowered to seek support without fear of judgment or confinement.

4. CREATING THERAPEUTIC ENVIRONMENTS TAILORED TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

In addition to safety and humanization, modern behavioral health design emphasizes the creation of therapeutic environments tailored to individual needs. Recognizing that different patients may require different types of therapeutic spaces, designers prioritize flexibility and customization. Design elements are carefully curated to avoid overstimulation or triggers, fostering a sense of calm and comfort. By creating spaces that feel familiar and welcoming, despite anti-ligature design considerations, designers aim to reduce anxiety and promote engagement in treatment.



The more “normal” a unit feels, the more likely patients are to choose to stay and receive full and optimal treatment. This approach underscores the importance of patient-centered design, where every aspect of the environment is thoughtfully curated to support healing and well-being.

5. ENHANCING OUTPATIENT BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DESIGN

When it comes to outpatient behavioral health, the design considerations extend beyond inpatient facilities. Much can be said for the value of discreet entry points or integrating outpatient units within existing hospital structures, allowing patients to enter through the same doors as any other patient. Like inpatient units, outpatient facilities should prioritize elements such as windows and views, natural light, calming colors, ease of circulation, privacy, and a welcoming atmosphere. These spaces should feel cozy and inviting, providing a sense of comfort and security for individuals seeking support outside of the inpatient setting. By seamlessly integrating outpatient behavioral health services into existing healthcare environments, designers can further reduce stigma and promote accessibility, ensuring that individuals receive holistic care that meets their unique needs.

In conclusion, the evolution of behavioral health design reflects a broader cultural shift towards prioritizing mental health and well-being. As the conversation around mental health continues to evolve, so too will the innovative approaches to design, ensuring that every individual receives the care and support they deserve.

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