



- ▼ Philosophical Foundation for Integrative Medicine
 - Mind and Body Connection
 - Spirituality and Healthcare
 - Beliefs and Culture
 - The Therapeutic Relationship
 - Prevention and Wellness
 - Community and Environment
 - Individual Empowerment
- ▶ Integrative Care

“Take courage. The human race is divine.”

— Pythagoras

“We are not meant to be alone—we are meant to be parts of bigger families, bands, and tribes. The strength and comfort of community come from the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And realizing that you have within you a limitless source of love that can benefit everyone and everything will help you form the best and strongest connections of your life.”

— Andrew Weil, MD / Founder, Program in Integrative Medicine, University of Arizona College of Medicine

Community & Environment: Healing from the Web of Life



“The role of the healer is a person who helps to facilitate or create the environment in which the individual can take charge of their life, and achieve well-being.”

- Ellen Beck, MD
 Director of Community Education, Family Medicine Department, University of California, San Diego

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1 2 3 next ▶

The New Medicine premieres nationally on March 29th, 2006. Check your local PBS listings for more information.

Community and environment are both a powerful forces that can affect a person's physical and mental health. We are intimately and inextricably connected to the people in our lives and to the physical spaces that we inhabit, and that connection can contribute to illness, or it can help make us well.

In 1979, a landmark study of residents of Alameda County, California, by Drs. Leonard Syme and Lisa Berkman, showed that people with greater social ties lived longer than those with fewer social ties. ⁽¹⁾ During the 1980s and 1990s, breast cancer research revealed that women in support groups fared better than those who suffered through their illness alone. More recently, research shows that smokers who attend support groups have fewer relapses than those who don't seek support, and a growing body of evidence suggests that the support of a family or a community can help buffer the negative effects of stress, depression and anxiety and assist in coping with illness.

The support and love that comes from community is part of what medicine is now calling an optimal healing environment. "In modern science, evidenced-based information gives us new insight into the core components of healing and how to create optimum healing environments," says Wayne Jonas, MD. This insight is derived from "research on the impact of social relationships and spirituality on health, on the role of lifestyle and environmental factors, on factors in consciousness, intention and self-perception, and on how these factors control adaptive and repair mechanisms in cellular and molecular biology and on whole persons." ⁽²⁾

An optimum healing environment is defined as, "a system and place comprised of people, behaviors, treatments, and their psychological and physical parameters. Its purpose is to provide conditions that stimulate and support the inherent healing capacities of the participants, their relationships and their surroundings. This environment can include both general and specific physical, behavioral, psychological, social and spiritual components." ⁽²⁾



In seeking to create these optimum environments, aside from the emphasis on community, many centers of integrative medicine have crafted their physical spaces to evoke healing. Attention is given to visual esthetics, the flow of energy, sound and music, taste, lighting, air, water, art, horticulture, architecture and building materials. For example, architects for the Dickinson & Gooding Center for Early Detection at the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine used the principle of the Golden Ratio or Golden Mean in their design. Shapes proportioned according to the Golden Ratio have long been considered aesthetically pleasing and are used frequently in art and architecture. The ancient Pythagoreans, who defined the Golden Mean as expressions of ratios (1:1.618), believed that reality is numerical and that the golden ratio expressed an underlying truth about existence.

"The ancient principles of feng shui—a Chinese art built on the belief that qi, the vital life force pervasive throughout the universe and existing in all living things, can be affected by our external environment—were utilized in the initial planning of the Continuum Center for Health and Healing," explains director Woodson Merrill, MD. "The well-known Feng Shui master Alex Stark worked closely with the architectural firm of Guenther Petrarca, a leader in green design and the use of eco-sensitive materials. This collaboration ensured that construction and design principles optimized the use of the spaces' potential." Natural, non-toxic materials were used throughout the Center and building elements—including paints, finishes, floor and wall materials—were carefully chosen with attention to environmental responsibility.

"We now better understand that healthcare environmental management is a public health issue," says Merrill. "And as providers of healthcare, it only makes sense that we would do whatever we can to make less garbage and make it less toxic to the environment and human health. We are ethically obligated to deal with this issue or our mission statements are in question." Extensive information about "green healthcare" can be found at the Health Care Without Harm web site at www.noharm.org.

Creating gratifying physical spaces, be it through beauty or ecology, is a way of inviting connection with the world around us. In the same way, nourishing a loving family or community builds connection and places us, naturally, in a more healing environment. As Jack Kornfield, PhD, founding teacher of the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Center so eloquently says, "We are always in relationship, always interconnected. Expanding our spiritual practice is actually a process of expanding our hearts, of widening our circle of insight and compassion to gradually include the whole of life."

References

1. Berkman LF, Syme SL. Social networks, host resistance, and mortality: a nine-year follow-up study of Alameda County residents. *Am J Epidemiol.* 1979 Feb;109(2):186-204.
2. Jonas W, Chez R, et al. Investigating the Impact of Optimal Healing Environments. *Altern Ther Health Med.* 2003;9(1):58-64.