Does Space Matter in Mental Health Treatment?

An exploratory study for a child/adolescent mental health inpatient unit in the University of Minnesota Masonic Children's Hospital examined design elements and spaces as contributing influences to behavior and wellbeing for patients, staff, and families.

Overview

Treating children and adolescents with mental and behavioral health issues is challenging. For those seeking treatment, care must be of the highest quality. Research suggests therapeutic environments can positively influence the patient experience. Treatment, culture, and care models that place emphasis on enhancing the relationship between patients and staff rather than on controlling patients are a growing standard of care and have greater effectiveness when supported by a therapeutic environment.

The groundbreaking Child/Adolescent Mental Health Unit renovation used evidence-based design strategies to enhance the organization's care model, uncovering a better understanding of the link between the physical environment and the healing process for children and adolescents facing mental health challenges. Therapeutic milieu was incorporated into the renovation, a concept that advances the general management of patient care by incorporating components of the psychiatric environment to achieve best treatment outcomes with patients and their families.

Methodology

After completing the inpatient renovation, the University of Minnesota Masonic Children's Hospital and BWBR partnered to conduct a post-occupancy study focused on how the design elements and spaces influenced calm feelings for patients. This mixed-method study combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches in assessing the behavior and wellbeing of the patients, family, and staff through surveys, interviews, and image surveys. The approach focused on gathering both patient and staff perceptions of design elements and their impact on patients and family outcomes.

AT A GLANCE

Project Type
Behavioral Health

Location
Minneapolis MN

38,500
Square Feet

Completion
2013

Findings

Patients are able to control their environment through lighting (dimming and color-changing accents) and music control panels in many of the activity, therapy, and group rooms. The most commonly selected design elements and spaces with calming effects were those offering choice and control: music panels, colored lights, the patient's room, use of the therapeutic pool, and light dimmers.

Choice & Control *with the physical environment contributes to* **feelings of calm** *for the child and adolescent patients.*

Increased physical activity *is associated with* **decreased behavioral issues**

51% of respondents | *alluded to the clinical benefits of* **physical activities** *that have been incorporated into the* **treatment model** *on the units as a result of the renovation*

Needs-adaptable rooms *enhance positive* **behavioral outcomes**

53% of staff | *attributed patients'* **positive experience** *to the way patient rooms were enhanced to* **accommodate** *specific needs*

Units' **design features** *are of* **clinical utility**
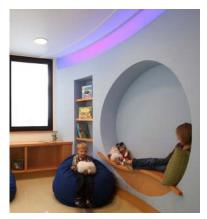
73% of staff | *reported* **positive impacts** *of the units' design and environmental features on helping* **patients cope**

Staff discussed how the colors, artwork, and the open areas on the unit aid patients in maintaining emotional regulation while working on their behavioral and mental health goals.

Impact and Insight

Overall, the results suggest that space does matter in child-adolescent mental health facilities. Results of this study suggest that design features in which patients have choice and control create an atmosphere that is perceived to be calm during their stay. Staff were also influenced by the new unit design, generating feelings of calm, safety, and pride in the work environment that influences the delivery of patient care.

Publication

BWBR supports research across all areas of our practice to inform design decisions and build knowledge about occupant and building performance.

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