How a care environment can lead to positive emotions

This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Citation: STACEY, P.K., 2014. How a care environment can lead to positive emotions. Care Home Management, (Jan/Feb 2014 edition), p.20

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Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/24280

Version: Published

Publisher: © JNJ Media Ltd

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How a care environment can lead to positive emotions

Many healthcare settings tend to focus on what’s practical. But being unwell, or being surrounded by others who are, leads to mental stress and a difficult emotional ‘journey’. Positive emotions therefore inevitably play an important part in the psychological healing process. Dr Patrick Stacey of Lancaster University Management School considers the importance of the environment on a care setting.

The physical environment can either soothe or contribute to stresses. We still have some way to go until we understand how this environment may work in tandem with the associated services in order to promote emotional positivity.

Our research has looked at design and the emotional wellbeing of the users of a cancer care facility called the Maggie’s Centre London, a respite home that provides non-institutional support to cancer sufferers.

It is an extreme example, but provides some evidence of how sensitive approaches to design benefit experiences. Maggie’s Centres are places to turn to for help with any of the problems, small or large, associated with cancer. Under one roof, patients and their relatives and friends can find spaces to be alone or together; get help with access to information; to benefits advice; and to psychological support both individually and in groups.

We spoke to a range of patients and staff involved with Maggie’s about their experiences. Although excellent in the application of medical science, it was felt to impose rules, prohibiting patients from entering certain areas such as corridors and kitchens, unintentionally undermined their emotional wellbeing. Rules such as these create a “sense of secrets”, and of being subordinate. Corridors tend to be very narrow, exacerbating feelings of confinement, of entrapment, as though in a prison.

Whereas traditional cancer care facilities were thought to have signs “absolutely everywhere”, Maggie’s designers left out many of the usual signs, except those necessary for health and safety legislation, in order to create a more friendly, less bossy feel, and encourage more interaction.

The main design feature of Maggie’s is the kitchen or ‘bothy’, in which patients could make their own cup of tea. This encouraged a more homely, less institutional feel. The acoustics were designed to be bouncy, to enhance the patient’s sense of their own presence: you can hear the sound of your own voice clearly.

There is also recognition that there needs to be private places for contemplation and for one-to-one conversations. This allowed patients to choose between the ‘quiet pause’ and the social kitchen, depending on how they felt.

The whole building is ‘buffered’ with surrounding birch trees, meaning soothing sounds from the wind in the trees, and huge leaves in one of the courtyard gardens so there is a harmonious patterning of rain on leaves. Garden plants are perfumed and some are edible, all to encourage a feeling of being part of a sympathetic, living environment.

A curtain walling protects the Centre from some of the noise of the street and wraps itself around the building, suggesting both an artery leading into the heart, but perhaps also the idea of an extended arm hugging the building.

For any people-centred service, but particularly relating to care and health, consideration of emotions needs to be central to design and management of facilities. The response to the steps taken by Maggie’s - many of them simple and inexpensive - has been remarkable, with a stronger bond being created among service users and reports of improved wellbeing, sense of health and recuperation.