

Patient Discomfort and How Common Areas Can Help

Picture a hospital waiting room. What do you see? A long, uncomfortable wait? Or do you see a beautiful space anticipating your arrival that appropriately meets your needs? Chances are you've encountered both — one that presents a high degree of discomfort in an already uncomfortable situation, or one that tends to aid in emotional and physical comfort.

Unfortunately, the latter seems to be more of a luxury instead of the norm. The majority of common spaces, according to a compilation of Steelcase Health research, tend to *create* emotional distress in an already anxiety-filled situation.

Fortunately, designing and maintaining a space that reduces patient discomfort can be made simple, by relying on both tangible and intangible cues that begin with our basic senses and become more complex the further we dive into solutions.

4 SOLUTIONS FOR MORE PEOPLE-FRIENDLY, COMFORTABLE COMMON SPACES

1) **Address visual chaos.** “Common spaces in healthcare environments that have visual chaos upon entering the space are uncomfortable, adding to the emotional distress of the patient’s journey,” explained Jason Vanderground, brand manager of Steelcase Health. “If a space is well-ordered, our impression will be much different than entering one that appears unorganized.” Visual chaos doesn’t always mean messy; it could inadvertently be a result of paint choice, antiquated artwork, old technology, outdated furniture, and even something as simple as tattered reading materials.

2) **Acknowledge the underlying value of scent.** Sight and smell are the first cues that begin to cultivate an impression of what to expect from an experience. Beyond the visual queues experienced upon an arrival, smells may also trigger a sense of chaos or peace — from the familiar, like coffee, to medical smells such as rubbing alcohol.

3) **Design for palate of place.** During our research, we realized there are times when people desire a high degree of privacy, while at other times, they may need to connect physically and virtually. There are times when patients come with a huge support group as well as times when patients come alone. And, finally, there are times when individuals desire to get work done as they wait, and times when they just need to mentally escape. Each scenario needs a different solution, yet each solution can live in tandem with one another. (Read more about [isolation](#) and [disconnection](#).)

4) **Develop solutions that take into account various postures.** “Often you see people shifting around in their seats, standing, and leaning. Dealing with poor physical conditions in common spaces makes it difficult to get comfortable,” Vanderground said. A solution is to provide common area environments that offer choices and control over comfort levels — be it a [hospital chair](#) that enables patients to shift into a lounge position, sitting eye-to-eye with family members, or perching to use technology versus balancing it in your lap. “Creating an environment that offers various postures throughout a wait can make people of all sizes, conditions, and activity level comfortable,” stated Vanderground.

HOW REGARD CAN HELP

Through its research of common areas, Steelcase Health discovered three distinct themes — isolation, disconnection, and discomfort. [Regard](#) was designed to specifically address the transition moments in the healthcare journey. By connecting people and technology, providing privacy, and supporting multiple postures, Regard moves beyond a place where people sit and wait to one that actually can aid in the calm during a time of high anxiety, be leveraged for healthcare education, or simply help individuals remain productive during times of transition.

DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE

“With all the pressing demands on healthcare leaders today, it is understandable that the consideration of how the physical space can have a significant impact on patient behavior and indeed on clinician behavior is dismissed. Reimagining healthcare starts with insights about what people want and need. Reinvention of space starts with insights that result from rigorous study of what physicians and patients need and want, and what they actually do in a space. When both are married, it can have a significant effect on how fast we move toward better quality of care for everyone involved and how seamlessly these changes come to fruition,” stated Rob Heitmeier, General Manager of Steelcase Health.

“This is the new reality. The healthcare journey needs to be an integrated one. One that facilitates connections among patients, families, and clinicians. One that enables people to take control of the journey, and their health in general. Amid all this change, still often overlooked or underemphasized, however, is the role of the physical space and the design of the physical space in creating this integrated experience.

Faced with such sweeping changes, healthcare organizations should not overlook an asset that’s highly leverageable and pivotal to success; their spaces. There is a significant opportunity to strategically rethink how healthcare spaces can dramatically improve the experiences of everyone involved,” continued Heitmeier.

Read Rob Heitmeier’s entire Perspective on the Future of Healthcare in [Time for Change; Positive Disruption to the Medical Cocoon](#)

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