

The Road and Robe to Wellness

Carol felt her shoulders relax as she entered the new Capital Health Medical Center for her first radiation treatment for breast cancer. The lobby's cascading waterfall, soothing wall colors, and room dividers of glass-enclosed leaves all made her think, "This hospital is state-of-the-art AND they care." Arriving at Radiation Oncology, she sat down on a cozy chair that embraced her. While waiting, her body stiffened up again as she imagined herself lying on a table in a dreary hospital gown being bombarded by radiation.

"Carol?" The nurse gently greeted her, ushered her into a changing room, and handed her a lavender-wrapped package with a gold seal that read, "A Gift for You." Inside was a soft, silver and gold kimono-style hospital gown. She put it on. The robe's leaf print wrapped her in gentle botanical imagery. She felt renewed. Warding off her feeling of vulnerability, she closed her eyes and began to visualize her worry as leaves falling gently away. . .

Why is such *personalization* important in healthcare settings? Inevitably hospitals are the stage settings against which human dramas are played out. No matter how beautiful the set, each patient asks the questions, "Will I get better?", "How will my condition affect my life?" and/or even "Has my life been worthwhile?"

As the patient's *psychological* drama unfolds, the following can help patients imagine themselves as heroes on a journey (1) rather than as helpless victims:

The Healing 'Set' – Designers who encourage hospitals to provide patients with views of nature often explain that there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems. (5) Understood in the context of the unfolding patient drama, natural, nurturing design elements may help patients view their lives as part of their 'heroic struggle' that mirrors the process of renewal, equilibrium and harmony inherent in organic systems (2).

The Healing 'Costume' – As healthcare settings transform into soothing sensory oases, patients may feel increasingly vulnerable dressed in a contrastingly flimsy hospital gown. Clare Cooper Marcus, points out that both home and clothing may represent "a basic protector of self". (3) Clothing can act as a catalyst helping patients visualize their metamorphosis from sickness to health.

The Healing 'Plot'- Rubin Battino, M.S., points out:

Everybody grows up with healing and curing stories that they have learned and incorporated from family and friends. . . . These stories control the way that a person goes about helping herself If your family story is that all Smith men die young of a heart attack, or die "with their boots on," or never show pain, or are survivors, or are fighters, or are weaklings when ill, or . . . , guess how they will approach the diagnosis of a life-challenging disease.(4)

Alternatively, Battino suggests helping patients look towards the future by asking such questions as: "How would you change your evolving life's story? What would be different so that you become who you want to be? What particular healing images do you sense would work for you?"(5) Design interventions can help patients use their life story to visualize healing.

Healing ‘Props’ – Research indicates, for example, that patients respond positively to artwork with creative open space stories into which they can project themselves. (6) Photographs also are often bedside touchstones: Walk down any hospital unit for the long term ill and you’ll see many patients using photos of loved ones as their own nurturing ‘props.’ (7)

Healing ‘Players’ – The presence of family and friends provides patients with support and, ideally, hope and meaning. Thus furniture arrangements, for instance, should enable loved ones to gather. Uniquely, the **“Robe to Wellness”** that Carol wore at Capital Health also incorporates online and in-person social networking as crucial to the making of the gown: To provide for women’s *psychological* well-being, ‘well wishes’ messages of support posted by people around the world on www.robetowellness.com are transferred on to labels. Then survivors, their families, and friends at breast cancer resource centers stitch such personal greetings into the robe collars. Thus both “Robe to Wellness Sewing Circles” and the robes, themselves, offer patients personal, emotional support.(8)

Overall, for healing places to be truly patient-centered in the fullest sense, the road to wellness can lead patients through wonderful natural settings. The spaces they encounter can be beautiful and functional. Beyond this, however, this road can be one patients blaze for themselves via the psychodrama of their own story, told through healing design elements, that express each person’s most fulfilled self.

1. According to Joan Borysenko, Ph.D. “A person who is a *transformational copier* is . . . born or develops the capacity to look at the events in their life in perspective and to look for the deeper meaning in things and to say whatever does go on an happens in my life, I can learn something from it. I can be wiser from it. It is that attitude that often correlates with better health.” *Minding the Body Mending the Mind: Psychoneuroimmunology and Beyond*. (Mentor, Ohio: ACSW, Inc., 1994.) Audio tape 1B.
2. Based on comments by Kevin Sink, photographer with a master’s degree in physiology and cell biology, Healthcare Design 09 Conference, Orlando, Nov. 2, 2009.
3. Clare Cooper Marcus, “The House as Symbol of Self.” In Proshansky, W. Ittelson and L. Rivlin (eds.), *Environmental Psychology: People and their Physical Settings* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976) p. 436.
4. Rubin Battino, M.S. *Metaphoria: Metaphor and Guided Metaphor for Psychotherapy and Healing* (Williston, Vt: Crown House Publishing, 2002.), section 17.2.
5. Ibid., Section 17.2.
6. Catherine Mayer Ambient Art™ brochure.
7. Design Psychology research shows, in fact, that photographs are among people’s most special objects. See Toby Israel, *Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy Editions, 2003.), Chapter 3.
8. For more information about obtaining a “Robe to Wellness” for hospitals or individuals see www.robetowellness.com

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About the author: Toby Israel, Ph.D. is a visionary founder of the new field of Design Psychology. Her worldwide experience and groundbreaking theories are summarized in her book Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places.

