

Make Space to Thrive

Your home plays a powerful role in how you feel each day. With a few thoughtful adjustments, it can benefit your mental health, foster a sense of balance, and become a steady source of calm.

BY MONIKA BIEGLER EYERS

When something feels off, we tend to look at our habits. Maybe we need more sleep. Less scrolling. More steps.

Less wine. More water. Rarely do we consider the room we're sitting in. We should, though, says Sally Augustin, PhD, an environmental/design psychologist and the principal at Design With Science. "The brain pulls from the sensory inputs it's receiving at any given moment." As a result, our spaces directly influence how stressed we feel, how well we focus and rest, and our overall well-being.

She's not just talking about the obvious clutter and disorganization, either, although those are good places to start. A 2024 study looked at the impact of interior design on mental health and found that cluttered spaces were associated with higher stress levels and feelings of being overwhelmed. "In a cluttered environment, every object is competing for our attention, increasing our anxiety and making it difficult to focus, think clearly, and create," says Annie Guest, therapist and author of *Design For Your Mind*, which explores how she used her mental health expertise to renovate her home to spark creativity and recharge her life. "Well-organized living spaces reduce anxiety and promote calm," she adds, nodding to anyone who's ever struggled to open a kitchen drawer or spent too much time looking for their keys.

Cleanliness factors in too, of course. Just try to relax on the couch with a dirty kitchen lurking in the corner of your eye. The good news is that even the mere act of sprucing up can set you on a path to well-being: A recent study from People Inc. (*Real Simple's* parent company) found that both Gen Z and Millennials enjoyed the emotional relief of cleaning a space as much as they enjoyed the visible results.

Then there's the design of it all. Some rooms have clear spots where specific pieces of furniture "should" go. Certain colors can energize or soothe or inspire. Research suggests that lighting, textiles, and even decorative items can positively impact our mood. There's also science that supports decorating with natural elements, known as biophilic design, points out licensed therapist-turned-interior designer Anita Yokota. "When we intentionally bring nature into a space, rooms feel more spacious, coherent, and restorative," she says. "We tend to feel calmer, more present, and less overwhelmed, which ultimately makes our homes better places to live, work, and rest."

With many of us continuing to spend more time at home, our surroundings deserve closer attention. To help, we gathered expert-backed tips from designers and organizers who prioritize mental wellness. Three clear principles emerged—each with lots of small-yet-impactful changes.

This room—designed by Anita Yokota for her mom—takes advantage of the greenery right outside, while the plant in the corner adds another biophilic touch.





1. Clean, Declutter & Set Up Systems

TAKE A MOMENT

"I find that people always overestimate how long a dreaded task will take, so they don't do it because it seems so overwhelming," says Shira Gill, home organizing expert and author of the book *LifeStyled*, all about how to simplify your home and your life. "I ask myself, *What can I accomplish in 15 minutes?*" Set a timer. Anything that's out of place gets put away. Junk gets thrown away. Dirty surfaces get a quick wipe. You'll be amazed at what you can get done.

BE A GATEKEEPER

Like a bouncer at your own front door, you can ruthlessly vet what enters your home, Gill says. Before anything gets in, ask yourself a

few key questions: *Where will I put this? Do I already have something similar? Will this add value to my life or will it add more stress?* The less stuff you let in, the less you have to clean, organize, and manage, she points out.

SAY NO TO NEW

With the goal of owning less stuff, Gill suggests a purchase pause—30 days

of buying only the essentials. Even after that's over, make impulse shopping harder by deleting saved credit cards from all your devices. Also, the next time you want to buy something, wait 48 hours and see if you still want it. "It's wildly effective because 99% of the time you can't even remember what it was," Gill says. Lastly, gamify things by putting the exact amount of money you would have spent into a savings account. These tricks can help you stress less about the amount of stuff in your house *and* help you feel better about your finances.

PRACTICE GENEROSITY

Donating gently used items that you no longer need or use is a win for many reasons. It helps people, frees up space, and feels good. In fact, the World Happiness Report from 2025 found that altruistic behaviors are consistently associated with higher life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Make it easy by creating a permanent donation zone in your house, says Gill. This can be as simple as a tote bag in the hall closet. When it's full, donate immediately.

DO THE STUFF VS. SPACE CALCULUS

This is Gill's mantra for zeroing in on what's most important to you. If you focus on what you're gaining (space, ease, time) instead of what you're giving up (stuff), it can help you part with things. For example, Gill's family values travel. By keeping a minimalist home, they save money and are easily able to rent out their house when they go on vacation, which in turn pays for their trip. "The more spaciousness I can have, the better. I see it as a ticket to freedom," she says. For you, it might be that when you edit your clothes and donate items you haven't worn in years, you get a neater closet that's easier to find things in.

RETHINK HOW YOU DO THINGS

Smart systems automate and simplify your daily tasks, Guest says. You can have the best shoe rack in the world, but if everyone leaves their sneakers piled by the door, it's not all that helpful. "Systems should be easy to maintain—not sources of new stress or frustration," she adds. If you're spending too much time putting everyone's kicks away, maybe it's time to switch to, say, a basket by the door.

INVEST IN MATCHING ORGANIZERS

Repetition in design is soothing, so try using matching bins rather than a hodgepodge of baskets and containers. It creates less visual noise for your brain to process, according to Gill, and it just looks a million times nicer!



Aside from the tiny table and chairs, you'd never know this is an area for kids. Organizer Shira Gill wisely used matching baskets to hide stuff—even though the bins also live behind a cabinet door.

Interior designer Olga Naiman intentionally styled her shelves to bring a playful, transportive energy. Note the basketball, the colorful art, and even the way some books are tilted.



DO AN ENERGY CHECK

We often make design choices based on how things look. Instead, think about how you want to feel, suggests interior designer Olga Naiman, whose book, *Spatial Alchemy*, is rooted in the idea that small design tweaks can propel you toward the life you want. Maybe you're part of the sandwich generation—juggling work, children, and aging parents. Life is chaotic, and when you walk through your front door, you just want to relax. Look around and see what in your

2. Keep Your Goals in Mind

home is sapping your energy. That aforementioned clutter is usually a culprit. "It's not just messy, it's stagnant energy. It represents unmade decisions and unfinished business," Naiman says. Misguided

furniture choices can drain you too. Think about sitting down for dinner at the end of a long day on hard wooden chairs or backless counter stools. They will not help you unwind. And that too-small-for-the-room rug? Naiman cautions it makes everything feel unmoored. "Each of these is a tiny compromise, and they all add up. Your home is either feeding your energy or quietly draining it," she says.

PICK THE RIGHT COLORS

The setup of the room you're in should align with what you do in the space, says Augustin, who adds that color is extremely important. "Research consistently shows that looking at shades of green enhances our ability to think creatively," she says. While a sage green could be good for an office, Augustin suggests colors that are less saturated and lighter for areas where you're trying to relax. Also: "Warm colors give the impression that the people we're with are friendlier," she says, offering a slightly smoky peach color for a living room or anywhere you gather.

ADDRESS TRIPPING HAZARDS

If you're feeling frustrated and stuck in life, take the time to see what could be holding you back at home as well, and eliminate those problems. "These are the small daily annoyances you've learned to ignore," says Naiman. "But here's what's really happening: every time you tolerate a small dysfunction at home, you're practicing tolerating dysfunction in your life." They can be literal, like a rug that won't stay flat, or more metaphorical, like a nightstand with no place to rest a glass of water. Fixing them is usually easy, and you'll feel gratified and empowered when you do.

RESOLVE OBSTACLES

Notice what's physically hindering you too: furniture that blocks movement through a room or impedes conversation, light switches that are inconvenient to reach, a foyer that doesn't function properly. Keep assessing what your needs are and tweaking your home to meet them. Move that ottoman, add a table lamp into the mix, get a narrow console. "You'll start to realize that the way you move through your home is connected to the way you move through the world," Naiman says.

INTRODUCE A POWER OBJECT

A power object is like a power suit—only it's something you look at instead of wear. It can be anything that symbolizes what you're hoping to achieve. For Naiman, when life began to feel like "all work and no play," she placed a vibrant basketball, designed by an artist, on her bookshelf. "I needed to remind myself that my creativity flourishes when I step away from my desk. It's playful, it's unexpected, and every time I look at it, it pulls me back to that energy," she says, adding that you could go bigger and set up an entire power bookshelf or power wall.





A soft velvet headboard delivers a lushness to Naiman's bedroom that a metal one could never offer.

GET REFLECTIVE

Pay attention to where you look at yourself in mirrors. Do you really want to be banished to a flimsy mirror on the back of a door? Nope! "Consider the cumulative effect of seeing yourself that way every single day for a year. Now imagine choosing a mirror that creates an emotional charge, like a regal gold mirror, and placing it where it does real work," Naiman says. She suggests placing mirrors—and thus your view of yourself—in prominent positions, like the foyer or the end of a long hallway. "It means you walk toward that version of yourself daily."

CURATE FOCAL POINTS

"Where attention goes, energy flows," says Naiman. Ask yourself what you see when you walk into your home, when you wake up in the morning, and before you go to bed. Make sure those views make you feel good. This goes for what you see in those mirror reflections too.

COZY UP A CORNER

"You need at least one seat where you can feel very safe—where nothing can sneak up on you from behind," Augustin says. Humans may have evolved, but our brains still seek physical security. An upholstered chair with a high back, tucked into a corner or niche, offers that sense of protection. "A seat like this for a person who's having a challenging day can help them feel physically safe and secure, even when we rationally know that we're not going to come to any harm in our home."

TREAT YOURSELF

Seemingly tiny upgrades can actually improve your sense of self-worth, Naiman says. Things like matching hangers in the closet and dish brushes with wooden handles elevate your daily touch points. "Individually they're small changes, but cumulatively, you're surrounding yourself with dozens of nice moments

throughout the day," Naiman says. Similarly, laughter is a powerful tool too; it releases endorphins in the brain, which can reduce stress and boost your mood. So put humorous art in unexpected places to give yourself a giggle, Naiman suggests.

THINK ABOUT WHERE YOU ZOOM

Rather than relying on virtual backgrounds, curate what people see behind you. And be intentional about what's off to the side and what you're facing when you're working from home. "You're literally creating a set for yourself," Naiman says. "Consider how the colors look with your complexion and that the background isn't so busy that people have trouble focusing their attention on you." As for what you're looking at, face something visually inspiring that represents what's motivating you. It could be artwork, a mood board, a shelf with your power object(s), or that entire power wall.

ABANDON YOUR DESK FOR A BIT

For when you need to get through some reading or really roll up your sleeves on a project, Guest has some advice that might seem counterintuitive: Have a place where you can stretch out comfortably and work for hours. "It might be a sectional sofa or an armchair with an ottoman," she says. "To do your best work at home at your highest level of executive functioning, it's not necessary to sit for hours at a desk."

REST EASY

Naiman is a big fan of creating a bedroom that encourages decompression as a step toward a better night's rest. Consider soft textiles throughout (upholstered bed frames instead of metal ones, and curtains not blinds), plus warm, dimmable lighting and low-contrast color palettes. "Color is restful if you down-level the tone," she says, pointing out the difference between a bright clementine orange and a softer burnt orange.

3. Tap into Nature's Calming Powers

CHANNEL YOUR HAPPY PLACE

Not all biophilic design is about greenery, points out Yokota, whose new book, *Grounded Living* (out April 28), dives into how you can make your home a more peaceful place using earthy cues. She suggests zeroing in on whatever natural landscape resonates most with you and using that as your decorating guide. “We respond to many different landscapes in meaningful ways. The desert teaches us about light, shadow, stillness, and restraint. The ocean speaks to rhythm, depth, and flow. The forests offer softness, layering, and refuge,” she says. Choose patterns, colors, textures, and materials that fit within your chosen theme. Just know that busy

natural patterns tend to feel most restful when the colors are muted. So if a meadow is your vibe, try florals in dusty pinks rather than magenta.

BRING IN MORE PLANTS—BUT NOT TOO MANY

Plants can be decorative, yes. They can also calm the nervous system, reduce cognitive fatigue, improve air quality, and add life to a space. “Greenery

also reinforces our innate connection to care, rhythm, and stability. These are key elements for emotional balance at home,” Yokota says. Don’t have much of a green thumb? She recommends low-maintenance houseplants like the moonshine snake plant, rubber plant, satin pothos, and jade (which symbolizes prosperity). Be sure to keep things manageable, Augustin warns. “Don’t bring in too many plants, because then you get high levels of visual clutter. Just a few plants in the room, not a jungle.”

EMPHASIZE WHAT’S OUTSIDE

Exposure to nature relieves mental fatigue, Guest says. “Watching the birds at a bird feeder through the window as we take a break from studying helps refresh our brains and clear our minds.” Another idea: “If you can sit near a window with natural light and a view

of trees and other elements of nature as you work, you may find that you can focus and think clearly for longer periods of time.”

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SCENT

Certain fragrances can influence how we feel in a space—because scent sends signals to the amygdala, a part of our brain responsible for processing emotions. Take lavender, for example: Research suggests it may help reduce anxiety and improve sleep quality (try slipping a satchel under your pillow). Other calming and grounding scents include cedarwood and hinoki, says Yokota, who favors citrus notes like bergamot or orange for a gentle boost in alertness. “These nature-based scents can help shift mood by re-creating sensory cues associated with safety and vitality,” she says.

MIMIC THE SUN’S RHYTHM

Research shows lighting that evokes natural daylight patterns (called biodynamic lighting) can play a key role in regulating sleep, mood, and energy levels. “This allows the nervous system to stay balanced and aligned with its natural biological timing,” Yokota says. Try sheer curtains and bamboo shades to let in dappled, natural moving light (an effect that has been shown to reduce anxiety). And look at the number of kelvins to gauge a bulb’s color temperature. The lower the number, the warmer the glow—2700K evokes candlelight and is best in rooms where you want to relax; 5000K channels daylight for rooms where you want to feel alert.

INCORPORATE WATER

The sight and sound of water can lower stress levels and heart rates, and gently capture attention in a way that feels restorative rather than demanding, Yokota says. Your smart alarm clock likely includes rain sounds as a wind-down option. A humidifier can add gentle ambient noise while helping ease physical discomfort from dry air. For a more immersive experience, consider swapping your showerhead for a rain shower option that invites you to linger. At the end of the day (and, really, all throughout it), wellness is about slowing down and giving yourself permission to pause, reset, reflect.



Leafy wallpaper offers restorative benefits similar to those of real plants, says Yokota, who designed this stunning office.