

Healing Experiences Q&A

Jennifer Schlimgen, AIA, a principal at Kahler Slater, is dedicated to healthcare planning, operational re-design, and architectural and interior design. For 20 years, she has specialized in vision driven planning and design of healing experiences that engage the mind, body and spirit. With a deep understanding of total experience design, Jennifer works closely with staff reviewing operational processes and challenging assumptions. Additionally, she oversees complete brand fulfillment services for her clients, from developing staff service training protocols, to meaningful art programs and graphic design.

What are the elements of creating a healing experience?

At Kahler Slater, we guide our clients on the premise that there are four realms to every experience we have. The first realm is *people* – those who deliver the experience. In health care, that could be a caregiver or receptionist or scheduler, for instance. Second are the *products or services* being offered. For example, this could be a specific array of women’s midlife services or a birthing program. Third is the *perception* you want to give those who are participating in your experience or your marketplace. Perhaps it is personalized coordinated care throughout a woman’s life. Lastly, when these first three realms have been identified and understood, we design the *place* to support the entire experience. The 4P’s is the design model we use: **p**eople, **p**roducts and services (or *practices* in health care), **p**erception and **p**lace.

When these four realms are all in alignment, you have the opportunity to deliver a total experience that can be positive for everyone involved—patients, families, staff and physicians.

A healing experience is such a personal thing. In many ways, nothing in life could be more personal than your own healthcare experience. We all want and need different things at different times. Key features of healing experiences would be the ability to adjust to meet individual needs, to provide positive distractions that allow one to focus on the experience at hand, and to remove any negative disconnects, like long waits or an institutional setting. When you think of favorite memories in life, they are often vivid, engaging all the senses. The design of a healing experience should do the same. Because you have been well cared for, shouldn’t you feel better when you leave than you did when you arrived?

Explain the difference between a healing environment and a healing experience? How does an environment promote healing?

If you have a supportive, healing environment, but the staff is not in alignment with the experience you are trying to create,

you won’t have delivered a healing experience. Imagine visiting a beautiful restaurant with wonderful food and good music, but the service is terrible. You probably wouldn’t return. For a healing experience, the environment or *place*, is only one of the four realms. If you want to create a successful experience, place is very important but alone it’s insufficient.

An environment promotes healing by supporting patients in their most vulnerable state, and allowing them to focus on why they’re there. Calm environments that reduce stress, provide comfort and connect us to many aspects of the natural environment are supportive of healing. Access to fresh air, daylight, water, healing gardens, natural materials and artwork, for instance, all help reduce stress for patients and families as well as staff. Healing experiences also accommodate loved ones, making them participants in the healing and recovery process.

How do you approach an experience design project?

We begin our work with clients by engaging them in creating their project vision, which should be driven by a deep understanding of their unique marketplace. This vision becomes part of their culture, their mantra. Just as no two organizations or communities are exactly alike, the visions of each will be unique. It’s important to understand, in all of the realms of the experience, what is the high bar we are reaching for? What is the total experience we are trying to create? What is our aspiration?

Staff is a very important key to the experience. We’ve all probably had great memories of something positive someone did for us in a setting that was far from supportive, something great that happened in spite of the hurdles this person had to overcome to help us. When we talk about products and services, we are also looking at processes and work flows. You might discover that you have a very positive and well-informed staff who is burdened with a poor process. That can be very hard to overcome.

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We ask our clients a lot of questions about process and staff protocol details to confirm alignment with their project vision or to identify disconnects. Our healthcare clients talk about “cycles of service” or “episodes of care” for patients and families. It’s important to look at all of the steps along the way and find those that add value and those that detract, and work to take away the barriers to delivering excellent personalized service.

Each organization we work with also has to look at the employee experience they currently offer and ask themselves what they are doing to keep staff fresh, so that they can continue to deliver their best for patients and families. This is a key question in our current climate of aging caregivers and staff shortages, a major differentiator in a competitive market for talent. Staff need “off-stage” space where they can relax, unwind, grieve or celebrate and not worry about being seen by the public, and they also need to be personally recognized for the exceptional work they do every day. Training and support of staff are both very important aspects of the experience discussion.

How does a healing environment use the mind-body-spirit concepts that are becoming an integral part of clinical programs?

Beyond offering the specific programs already referenced and creating a themed design of the facility that in some way connects to nature, mind-body-spirit is a real area of opportunity that many organizations haven’t fully developed. On a tactical level, some have started to incorporate meditation spaces, areas for yoga and Tai Chi, and healing gardens that integrate these concepts. Yet, personally, I think we could do so much more to engage people on a spiritual level relative to healing. There are many who spend their lives studying spirituality who believe your health is your spiritual path in life, your personal journey of discovery. Forgiveness, for instance, is thought to be a key to healing in many spiritual traditions.

Many historic indigenous cultures view medicine as the same as their religion or spiritual life. (Buddhist monks and Native American Medicine Men are both spiritual and medical healers, for instance.) So, how, in our diverse current culture, do we tap into that wonderful reservoir of inspiration without offending someone? Most organizations avoid being specific – instead using references to nature because they are universal and safe.

How are women’s centers using this idea?

Beyond clinical programs that deal with the physical aspect of health, many women’s programs are looking at women holistically and asking them about their needs in the rest of their lives.

We are seeing more offerings of a wide variety of educational and support programs. Although many are obviously medically related, others tap into interests such as financial health and healthy hobbies, like gardening and book clubs. And great exercise programs are being offered too. Whenever any of these services can be complemented by access to outdoors and soothing, nature-themed environments, it is a strong advantage.

Is there research that shows definitively that a healing environment contributes to clinical outcomes? What do patients say about healing environments?

Research on the impact of environment on patient outcomes has been growing steadily for twenty years. The last several years have seen a greatly expanded interest in this aspect of our work. One recent article summarized more than 600 studies that linked the physical environment with outcomes for patients and staff. The bottom line is that environment matters when it comes to health and healing.

Patient satisfaction surveys provide some wonderful insight into healing environments and healing experiences. Here’s my favorite comment from a patient at the Aurora Women’s Pavilion in West Allis, Wisconsin: “I felt as if I had visited the home of a good friend.” This is exactly how we talked about the experience we were trying to create when we were designing the new facility with the Aurora team, and this kind of comment suggests that we were successful in bringing that feeling forward.

At Martha Jefferson Outpatient Women’s Center in Charlottesville, Virginia, the staff shared with us this patient note: “Today is 9-1-05. The horrors of Hurricane Katrina are so depressing. What a ‘MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER’ experience being here has been. I feel lifted in spirit. I especially enjoyed the raspberry-colored waiting room with all of the books and art. Everyone was caring and efficient in a gorgeous and comfortable facility. If there was a travel show, ‘The Health Facility Tour on HGTV,’ this would be the nicest.”

What is the role of the creative arts (art, music, dance, meditation) in developing a healing experience? How about therapies like massage, acupuncture, and Reiki?

These are all wonderful aspects that can be included. Art is probably the most often addressed, and it represents a great opportunity to speak to many people. There is a tradition of nature-related art in healthcare, which can be very positive. Recently we’ve seen more figurative art (art with people in it), which can be very moving, and can really celebrate everyday life. It’s important, especially in women’s health, where very feminine stereotypes often prevail in design, that art speak to the reality of our lives and not be overly romantic, to keep from just being trite decoration, a missed opportunity. Beyond the art on the walls, there is art therapy which involves the patient in the

inspirational experience of actually creating in various mediums, e.g., paints, clay, colored pencils.

Music is another area organizations could do more with. Live performance programs are wonderful but we don't see enough of them. Most public space would also benefit from recorded music and, again, the exact selection seems to be a challenge for many. There are specialists that design unique healing music for specific organizations that seem very intriguing. Dance seems to fall into the realm of exercise offerings.

Massage, acupuncture and Reiki are being explored and offered at a growing number of facilities as a means to enhance health through stress reduction. Most of these therapies can easily be provided in rooms that are essentially the size of typical clinical exam rooms, so experimenting with offerings or converting to other uses later is relatively easy to do.

All of these programs can enhance the experience for patients, families and caregivers. We've seen the use of some of these as perks for staff recognition, as gifts available for purchase at a retail venue as part of a women's program, or even as a service recovery strategy for someone who has had an unexpectedly long wait, for instance.

What is the most exciting aspect of your work in developing healing experiences? And what is its future direction?

Every day we have the opportunity to participate in the positive evolution of our culture, to create a better life for ourselves and future generations. Our Kahler Slater vision is to *enhance life through artful design*. It's gratifying to be able to work with visionary healthcare leaders who seek to transform the experience for themselves and their patients and staff.

As research in this realm continues to grow and the marketplace standards continue to raise consumer expectations, healing

experiences have become more prevalent and more sought after. Organizations will continue to look at strategies that help them staff in a more effective way and manage costs, and the healing environment movement should be key to any considerations.



Patient Room, Aurora Women's Pavilion

What advice do you have for established women's centers that may be thinking about an interior design update and want to enhance the healing experience?

Remember to look first beyond the finishes, furniture and artwork. Ask yourselves if you have the right people. Are you providing the right services? Is your perception in your marketplace consistent with your vision? When you have alignment in those three realms, then ask, what is the *place* that will support your work? If you could see your vision, what would it look like, feel like, sound like, smell like, taste like? That is the design idea you should pursue! ●

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