

Wall Murals & Wall Art Can Improve Treatment and Outcomes in Dementia & Memory Care Facilities

What will you find in this article?

There's a lot of conflicting information out there regarding the use of décor that stimulates vs. décor that soothes. Short answer: most patient populations require both environments.

All dementia and Alzheimer's patients are not the same. Even the same patient may have different needs on different days or different parts of the day. Wall murals offer an excellent and cost efficient way to create different spaces for different needs while still achieving cohesive design across your cognitive care facility.



Make the entrance to the unit as inviting as possible for caregivers and family members. Reminiscence Therapy employs décor that brings the well-remembered past alive. Wall murals and other wall art depicting bygone days, or just images that are immediately recognizable to all of your clients, can create familiar and comforting care environments. Wall murals can make the areas where you want your patients to congregate more attractive and those spaces you want to dissuade them from gathering less attractive. Dining room décor can help stimulate the appetite. Bathing rooms can be turned into inviting spas. Exits and elevators can be disguised. Way-finding signage can be clear and attractive.



Beautiful murals not only transform memory care hallways, they also serve as landmarks to help residents navigate from one area to another. You'll find a lot of experts who suggest that senior care facilities, and memory care units in particular, should be decorated in bold and bright colors, using patterns (though avoiding vertical stripes and anything that could resemble prison bars) and other design elements that stimulate the mind. Think multiple birds, animals, balloons or other items that can be counted or that you could ask a patient to find for you (e.g., "how many yellow birds can we find here?").

You'll also find a lot of experts who'll attest that memory care patients are best served in environments that limit excess external stimulation. They'll advise that colors should be warm, cozy and muted, that patterns should be used minimally, and that artwork with a lot of busy & competing graphic elements might be too distracting, cause anxiety, and generally be disruptive to dementia patients.

So... what's the right answer?

Well, both answers are correct... it just depends upon the patient or patients you're taking care of. Just as no two people are alike, no two patients with dementia are alike either.

Decorate with your patient's specific and changing needs in mind.

In general, patients with minimal dementia or in the initial stages of Alzheimer's are best served by environments that stimulate their cognitive functions. Give them plenty of things to do and look at while they're walking along the hallways or staring at the walls (and perhaps they'll spend less time just staring and more time interacting).

Likewise, patients who are easily made anxious by too many distractions, by bold & loud colors, or by busy patterns and/or too many design elements are best served by warmer, homier, quieter colors. Use patterns to break up the monotony of flatly-colored walls, but keep them simple and familiar (staying away from any pattern that could make them feel closed in, like vertical stripes).

If you're creating a dementia-friendly home for a senior who is "aging in place," then you probably have a pretty good idea of what they'll positively respond to. And if you're not sure (or even if you are), show different colors, patterns and artwork to them and have them assist in redecorating their home. After all, one of the biggest complaints those in their twilight years have is that every decision is made for them. This is an opportunity to get them involved and working those brain cells in a happy endeavor.

Make a strange place seem familiar with wall art that recalls the past.

One piece of design and décor advice for memory care patients (and, really, for all senior housing solutions from independent living to assisted living to nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities) is to make your environment as comfortable, familiar and non-institutional as possible. No one, even those suffering from dementia, wants to live in a sterile, hospital-like setting.

These days, however, most memory care units have a wide age-range of patients under their care. A vintage poster that might seem "current" and familiar to a 90 year old might be received quite differently by a 70 year old or a 50 year old.

Our best advice: choose décor that will be familiar to all of your residents and their visiting family members. Use wallpaper, wall murals and artwork that all of your patients will recognize and be comforted by.

Dining Rooms: Getting memory care patients to the dining area can be a challenge. Getting them to eat enough can be an even greater challenge. Senior care centers across the U.S. and Europe have had great success in using wall art and other décor to assist in both tasks.

Instead of a beige wall and an uninspired doorway, consider decorating the outside of the dining room to look like an outdoor café, a comfortable restaurant, or even a family dining room. Give it a welcoming entryway (check out our door mural collection). And then inside, decorate with murals and artwork that depicts fresh food, wide open wheat fields, tropical fruit trees, etc. – or carry that restaurant theme through with additional scenes depicting restaurants, cooking, baking, eating, etc.

Tub Rooms & Bathing Rooms: Sure... bathing areas need to be sterile and utilitarian, but that doesn't mean they have to look that way. Imagine how fearful you'd be if getting a bath required a hoist and two strangers!

Wall murals and custom-sized wall art can give your bathing room the look and feel of a resort spa. Tropical sunsets of the beach, a balcony overlooking a spacious pool, even scenes of people swimming can get the idea

across that this room is all about the water. A blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds and even bubbles can score the same effect.

Hallways and Room Entrances: Even those of us without cognitive impairment can get lost and confused when each hallway looks the same and each bedroom door (and all of the other doors) leading off of it looks the same.

Wall and floor graphics can visually guide residents toward, and away from, select areas.

Way-Finding: Most way-finding signage is crystal clear to those of us who speak the language and continue to have the cognitive skills to read. Signs that state "Exit," "Nurses Station," and "Dining Room," might not work as well for dementia and Alzheimer's patients.

Instead, consider wall graphics that actually depict someone exiting a room, a nurse providing compassionate care, a delicious meal or residents gathered around a dining table enjoying their meal.



No-Go Areas: Every facility has areas where residents simply are not permitted or where they don't want residents congregating. It's time-consuming for the staff and, let's face it, not the best way for caretakers to bond with their patients and develop strong, trusting relationships if they're always ushering them away.

Exit-seeking behavior can be minimized when doors are disguised as dead ends. Fire codes differ from city to city, so check with your local authorities.

Exit-seeking: Exits and elevators are two areas where you don't want residents congregating. It slows down the movements of the staff and poses a danger to residents who could get hit by quickly-opening doors, food carts and other equipment being moved throughout the halls. It also provides a quick escape for wandering residents and those patients who are always looking for a way out. Peel-and-stick wall murals depicting bookcases, brick walls, vine-covered trellises and other images provide a "full-stop" visual cue, indicating to residents that there's nowhere else to go and they should turn back now to continue their walk. Images like these not only hide the exits, but they do so in a beautifying manner. Supply closets and other doors can be disguised in the same manner.

Wandering-encouragement. Six in 10 people with dementia will wander, according to the Alzheimer's Association. Dead ends may frustrate or confuse those with dementia, which can lead to agitation among those who are wandering. The right wall graphics can help lead these residents through your hallways (especially if you have a circular or figure-eight corridor system) so they avoid agitation and keep moving. That extra exercise can, in turn, help build their appetites and help them sleep at the end of their day. We hope this article has been informative and has answered more questions for you than it has raised. For additional advice, the Alzheimer's Association offers a PDF with a list of more articles on designing for dementia patients. This article from AARP offers advice on how to improve things at home, with a focus on safety, for patients with dementia.

For managers of Alzheimer's and dementia care facilities, we also direct you to a great article from The Toronto Star on designing for patient care and comfort. Reference at <https://www.magicmurals.com/blog/decorating-for-alzheimers-and-dementia-care-with-wall-murals-and-wall-art/> Magic Murals (877) 448-7295.