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EXPLORING IDEAS THAT SHAPE THE PLACES WE WORK.

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# HOW TO FIND REFUGE IN AN OPEN OFFICE

*ISO more serenity at work? Joanna Andrae, a health and lifestyle consultant and founder of **Wandering Wellness**(<http://www.wanderingwellness.com/>), is here to help.*



*Birkenstock's new, open-plan Melbourne HQ is chock-full of natural materials that, according to research, contribute to a sense of employee well-being. Photo by Peter Clarke and Marc Bernstein-Hussmann via theadvocate.com.au.*

**W**hat is it about coming home? That sweet satisfaction we get as we turn the lock and push open the front door. We may even let out a deep sigh as we toss our keys on the table and drop our bags to the floor. Home: our sanctuary, our refuge, our place for peace.

I'll bet you never feel this way at work.

Although the lines between work and home are becoming increasingly blurred, many of our waking hours are still spent in an office — often an *open* office; one that's noisy, overwhelming, and full of interruptions. It makes sense that you'd crave more serenity at work — finding a “happy place” in the office can promote physical and emotional well-being. But how? Here are three ways to get started.

## 1. Bring the outside in

We know [nature is nice](http://www.nature-rx.org/)(<http://www.nature-rx.org/>), but we also know if you're reading this you probably work in an office and can't spend all day outside, so you'll be happy to hear that you can mimic some of its benefits in your workspace. In her book *Healing Spaces: The Science and Place of Well-Being*([http://www.amazon.com/Healing-Spaces-Science-Place-Well-Being/dp/0674057481/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1440094276&sr=8-1&keywords=healing+spaces](http://www.amazon.com/Healing-Spaces-Science-Place-Well-Being/dp/0674057481/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1440094276&sr=8-1&keywords=healing+spaces)), **Dr. Esther Sternberg** wrote that spaces with more light and access to natural scenery (and we're not just talking sweeping ocean views — even wood veneers will do the [trick](http://www.healthcaredesignmagazine.com/whitepaper/understanding-wood-material-connection-nature)(<http://www.healthcaredesignmagazine.com/whitepaper/understanding-wood-material-connection-nature>!)) can increase immunity and mitigate feelings of seasonal depression. Using colors found in nature, too, will promote well-being. According to **Dr. Sally Augustin**, an environmental psychologist, the color green, especially, is good for our mental health(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/people-places-and-things/201408/choose-green>): “Researchers have found that green spaces, inside and out, boost our mood and cognitive performance,” she wrote. “Seeing natural environments [and colors] when we're stuck inside helps us restock our cognitive energy levels after they've been depleted by the sort of focused work that most knowledge workers do.”

So whether it's a great view(<https://workdesign.com/2015/08/what-we-learned-in-san-francisco-about-billion-dollar-startups/>), a leafy green plant, gorgeous green paint, or maybe even a stump(<http://www.westelm.com/products/natural-tree-stump-side-table-f655/>),

these small touches will confer a big sense of groundedness, bringing you a little bit closer to that homey vibe that comes so naturally when you're in your own space.

## 2. Encourage individual and collective “time-ins”



*We love this image of the meditation room at WeWork's Chinatown location in D.C., which checks all of the boxes: green accents, natural views, and solitude. Image via [WeWork.com](http://WeWork.com)*

Although you would be hard-pressed to find an office without a wellness room, or a newspaper without an article touting the many benefits of meditation, it is still rare for offices to have a separate room dedicated to contemplation, or what I like to call “time-ins”. While folks are slowly catching on, only a small proportion of company leaders have invested in designated meditation rooms and classes for employees to come together to find balance.

If you don't have a dedicated meditation room in your office, one easy way to promote individual contemplative time is to increase utilization of existing wellness or nursing rooms. These spaces are of course essential for their intended use, but then they end up sitting unoccupied for long stretches of the work day. Why not stick a schedule on the door to promote organized use and even foster buzz around taking an introspective break? Or set out to make these existing spaces more inviting by installing comfortable chairs or cushions, perhaps a candle (electric will do) and a beautiful painting, or better yet, a picture of a stunning natural scene?

Leadership can set the tone here by not only encouraging employees to utilize this shared room, but also by taking advantage of it themselves.

On top that, a *group* meditation practice in the office may improve relationships between co-workers. In a recent study(<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/mindfulness-meditation-empathy-compassion/398867/>) documented in ***The Atlantic***, participants of an eight-week mindfulness meditation practice were shown to “triple the likelihood of . . . benevolent behavior, even under conditions known to discourage acts of kindness,” demonstrating that meditation could foster a greater sense of community and connectedness among employees. A weekly or bi-weekly group meditation can create a much needed reprieve from the busy open office environment and may send a signal to employees that the company cares about its employees’ well-being.

### 3. Mix it up



*A small focus space in Groove’s Baltimore HQ. Image via gotgroove.com.*


There is a growing trend towards creating quiet spaces for employees to do their work with less interruption. But these quiet spaces are not for the private “time-in” discussed above – rather, they support more studious activity in a library-like atmosphere. A quiet place like this can help to balance an open office by providing a place for employees to concentrate and focus, physically separated from the typical office din and distraction.

Companies like [Groove](http://gotgroove.com/) and [Betterment](https://www.betterment.com/) are incorporating quiet spaces for employees to focus in a comfortable setting. These rooms can also integrate natural objects to foster a sense of refuge and reflection without affecting productivity. If this isn't possible given space constraints, it's still essential that there are options for employees to experience a change of scenery. Leaders can encourage the use of a balcony, roof, or courtyard, and can aid in giving employees spaces that support collaborative work, along with the freedom to seek alternate spaces for more focused work.


To better promote refuge in an open office plan, organizations must encourage employees to take the time required to recharge and reset, and they've got to provide the space to support it. Looking to nature for inspiration and providing outlets for balance will set organizations and their employees on a course for better engagement, harmony, and success — and when that happens, it's possible we'll begin to enjoy our spaces for work as much we enjoy the ones for rest and play!


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