**Labyrinth Use at Hospitals**

Hospitals, meditation centers, religious institutions, counseling programs and schools around the world have them.

**What is a labyrinth and what's it for?**

A labyrinth is a simple, self-led walking path that simulates a spiritual journey. Labyrinths have been used for over 4,000 years and have many uses: for calming the mind and soul, meditation, as an aid to meditation/prayer; healing; a place of spiritual peace and safety; a way to develop self-knowledge, to get relief from stress and clear your mind, body and soul.

**What can I expect?**

Meditative music and LED candles can be used to fill the senses of participants as the open path takes them on a calming journey. The labyrinth has a simple path leading to the center where a person may sit and unwind or stand quietly, pray or meditate, and then walk back out. People “walk” the labyrinth slowly and silently, to acquire peace, healing, wisdom, guidance, hope, relief or comfort.  There are also places to sit outside the labyrinth to take in the beauty and relaxation.

**Is it easy and can I get lost?**

 It’s very simple and you can’t get lost. When ready, simply follow the path.  As you slowly walk in, focus on your breathing. It will help calm the mind’s chatter and allow for attentiveness, and to be open to the experience.   Walk at your own pace, stop, step out of the path to pause, or walk steadily to the center – it’s all up to you.  When you reach the center, there will be room to sit, to meditate, to listen or to pray if you wish. When ready to return, simply re-follow the path -- taking with you peace, relaxation, clarity, or perhaps a physical / spiritual renewal.

**Benefits of Labyrinths in Healthcare Settings**

For 30 years, Herbert Benson at Harvard University has championed the physiological benefits of meditation, which he calls the "relaxation response." He recognizes that meditation slows breathing, heart, and metabolic rates, and lowers elevated blood pressure. As a form of walking meditation, the labyrinth produces the same results. “Labyrinths offer an accessible, cost-effective, pro-active spiritual technology that does what science cannot do. Even in cases where outer healing fails, inner healing can still take place. Working in concert, medicine, design, environment, and labyrinths offer a whole that greatly exceeds the sum of its parts, he says.”

**A Vision of the Future**

Labyrinths are being made available at an increasing number of healthcare facilities, with more than 100 at healthcare facilities across the country, led in 1997 by **California Pacific Medical Center** in San Francisco.

In recent years, the medical community has turned its attention to health design, environment, and patient-centered care, recognizing that the subjective qualities of inner healing such as attitude, state of mind, and beliefs, have an enormous effect on the outcome of a patient's treatment and recovery.

The new, more holistic direction of healthcare has been largely passive, dealing with the color of walls, etc., designed to calm and comfort. Labyrinths, too, calm and comfort, but they represent the next step forward, in that they are active, not passive. They offer something the patient can do. In fact, labyrinths are pro-active, promoting well-being, *not just for patients, but also for staff, health providers, doctors, visitors, and even the local community.*

**Use in Hospitals**

A recent article about the labyrinth at **Mid-Columbia Medical Center** in Oregon quotes CEO Mark Scott as stating that the labyrinth complements the use of chemotherapy and radiation in cancer treatment. In verification, a cancer patient agreed that walking the labyrinth gave her a sense of confidence and control over her treatment. Attitude towards one's treatment process (inner healing) has been shown to be a significant factor in the efficacy of that treatment (outer healing).

**Three Rivers Community Hospital**, also in Oregon, invites the local community to use their labyrinth. Programs have included a women's cancer support group, hospice butterfly release, survivors' labyrinth walk, holistic nurses retreat, candlelit memorial service, Spears Cancer Center walk, Day of Renewal walk, domestic violence awareness walk, Rotary Club walk, volunteer chaplaincy program, and more.

The labyrinth at **California Pacific Medical Center** is just outside the waiting room. Inside, there is a sign and brochures describing how to walk the labyrinth. Surgeons sometimes walk the labyrinth before performing an operation, to enhance a sense of calm and mindful preparation for their craft. Nurses invite anxious patients and family members to walk the labyrinth, reporting that they return more relaxed and focused.

Labyrinths can be used by, both, individuals and groups, either without guidance or as part of a specific program (supporting the cancer journey, relieving grief or loss, etc.).

**For patients, a labyrinth provides:**

1. A quiet place where the simple act of walking offers a proactive way to ‘do’ something towards getting better.
2. A place where patients and family members can let go of the issues related to illness and injury.
3. A sacred spot where patients and their families can express intentions and hopes for the future.
4. A place to empower a sense of calm and focus before meeting with doctors or seeing loved ones.

A reduction in the stress related to being ill, an improved attitude about coping with ill health, an interest in participating in treatment, the return of hope or the inner peace necessary to complete life’s business before dying are a few of the responses possible for patients using the labyrinth.

**For a healthcare organization,**a labyrinth provides a clear-cut staff benefit; enhancing any health and wellness programming by offering:

1.    A way to clear the mind and focus attention prior to operating or caring for patients.

2.    A quiet haven where staff can deal with the pressures of work in a positive way.

3.    A calm environment in which to prepare for dealing with challenging situations.

4.    A place to regain balance and perspective, and relieve stress.

5.    Labyrinths are good for business. They offer a cost-effective means of being progressive and integrative. They provide a community outreach opportunity.

Labyrinths invite both patients and staff to tap their inner resources; offering a way of addressing the spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects of healing.

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**Information adapted, but initially provided by Pastoral Care program at Chilton Hospital in Pompton Plains, New Jersey.** [**http://www.chiltonhealth.org/spiritual-care**](http://www.chiltonhealth.org/spiritual-care)