



12 ELEMENTS TO CREATING  
*calm spaces*

LOOK TO YOUR  
SENSES—AND  
LESSONS FROM  
LIFE-BALANCING  
PHILOSOPHIES—TO  
DESIGN A TRULY  
SOOTHING ROOM.

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## YOU FEEL IT WHEN YOU STEP INTO A PEACEFUL SPACE. THERE'S AN ETHEREAL LIGHT QUALITY.

The colors wrap you up like a warm blanket. You want to sit down on the cushy sofa and just close your eyes, listen to soft music, and sink your toes into the soft rug underfoot. You could linger in this room forever. How do you cultivate the same warming effects in your home? Interior designers, professional organizers, and a feng shui expert share their strategies. Focus on one—or all—elements to create a calming, cozy escape.

### 1 START WITH WHAT YOU LOVE

"It's really important right now to have a place of calmness and comfort," says Emilie Munroe, an interior designer and principal of Studio Munroe in San Francisco. Munroe takes cues from the things her clients love to select the colors, fabrics, accessories, and materials that will help them achieve serenity. "The most important thing is to understand how individual the concept of what's restful, soothing, and comforting is." Munroe suggests taking a look at what you crave when you're seeking comfort. What fabrics and colors are the go-to clothes you lounge in? What scenes from nature do you picture when you think of a calm place? Use those as a starting point when designing a peaceful retreat.

London interior stylists, photographers, and authors of *Home for the Soul* and creators of the website The CONTENTed Nest ([thecontentednest.co.uk](http://thecontentednest.co.uk)), Sara Bird and Dan Duchars recommend surrounding yourself with items that have meaning in order to feel connected and happier. "The first and most important thing is to have things around you that you love," Bird and Duchars say. By decorating with items that encourage feelings of contentment and relaxation, you transform your house into a home.

### 2 Inviting Colors

The colors you choose for paint, wallpaper, and accessories set the stage for soothing spaces. Color psychologists find that in the U.S., soft pastels and blues and greens from nature—think sky, water, leaves—help lower blood pressure. Dorena Kohrs, owner of the Space Doula in Raleigh, a certified practitioner of the Chinese philosophy of feng shui, and a Clutter Clearing Coach, says color brings a certain energy to a room.

"Lighter colors help create calm and serene spaces. For

example, you wouldn't want to use red since it's a very active color and is not going to be calm and serene. But pastel colors and blues will feel calm. You can also use darker colors to make you feel like you're more in a cocoon," Kohrs says. "If you don't want to go all out and paint, you can bring in calming colors with pillows, throws, a vase, or an area rug." Bird and Duchars propose playing with the gradations of color or finish—matte to glossy—to ensure your calm paint palette doesn't feel drab.





# 3

## OH-SO-SOFT TEXTURES

A guaranteed way to de-stress is to cuddle with something soft—just think of your favorite stuffy from childhood and you instantly remember the love. Plush textiles like velvet, chenille, faux fur, and knits tend to be comforting. What's underfoot counts too. A rug your toes can't get enough of will feel extremely inviting.

Just remember, touch is as personal as color. "There are many beautiful fabrics that have a rough texture," Munroe says. "Some people like the tactile sensation of a raw linen or natural wool. But others find them scratchy and off-putting. Some love rich, luxurious velvets, yet someone else associates that with untouchable fanciness."

To achieve household bliss, involve anyone sharing your calm space on the selection of pillows, upholstered furniture, rugs, and throws. Close your eyes and run your fingertips over items to test whether you like the feel. For rugs, "Don't forget to take your shoes off and stand on it to make sure it feels good," Munroe says. One other caveat: If you know you'll end up regretting decorating with anything that's plush because it's not easy-care (like the velvet sofa you cover with a blanket for protection from your kids or pets), look for an alternative soft option that is more durable and low maintenance like microsuede.







## 4 NOT TOO LOUD, PLEASE

Soothing music helps calm a space, and today's wireless home sound systems enable you to play relaxing ambient music throughout multiple rooms so they feel like one connected environment. But another important sound factor is to reduce as much exterior racket—the lawn mower, barking dogs, traffic—as possible. “If you live near a busy street or in a city, heavy drapes are really important to creating a cozier space. They add some luxe, they add texture, and they lower

volume,” says Libby Langdon, a New York interior designer, TV makeover personality, and lighting designer. “They don't even have to close; they can stack outside your window frame. A heavier drape made from a textured fabric that's lined will help absorb nuisance sounds. And under your area rugs and stair runners make sure to use the thick gray felt rug pads instead of the thin rubber ones. You can't believe how much that will dampen sounds. Plus, they make your rugs feel cushier.”

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## 5 Fresh Scents

“Smell is often missed and forgotten when we think about our homes, yet it is one of our earliest memory triggers and is extremely sensitive,” Sara Bird and Dan Duchars say. While a good real estate agent will confirm that the smell of baking chocolate chip cookies elicits instant warm feelings, one of the best ways to create calmness when it comes to scent is to keep things fresh. Kohrs notes that in feng shui, “The formal front door is the mouth of chi and that's where energy comes in. It's important to open your front door on a daily basis to allow the flow of energy into your home. With my clients, I say to do it as a matter of ritual. Wake up, figure out your priorities, then go open the front door and greet the day. It's a way to welcome opportunity in and let fresh air in too.”

Another way to freshen up is to regularly replace your sheets, pillowcases, and inserts. “Time flies and people forget how long they have had their sheets, pillows, and pillowcases,” Munroe says. “Schedule a refresh once a year, like in January, and get yourself new pillow inserts, two interchangeable sheet sets, and a mattress pad. Even if you rotate which one of these you buy new, you will feel like things are fresh and clean.”

Also schedule times to regularly clean out the fridge, drain a front-loading washer, and vacuum and wash your pet's bed to enhance your home's overall freshness.





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## 6 Mood Lighting

The Swedes know that lighting candles warms up the long, cold winter months. Caroline Guntur, a professional organizer in Chicago who grew up in Ystad, Sweden, introduces the Scandinavian practice of *hygge*, or finding well-being and happiness in cozy moments, to her clients. “During the winter in Sweden we have the celebration of St. Lucia, the Festival of Lights, and we light a lot of candles everywhere—even battery-powered candles. There are processions and singing. I get a lot of inspiration about coziness from there. I think of snuggling up with a cup of tea in warm blankets with a fire going and lots of candles.”

Munroe turns to candles to envelop her and her family in that same feeling. “We have a candle in our front entry. When we all get home and gather at the end of the day or on weekend mornings, I will light it. It symbolizes our time together at the start or end of the day.”

Beyond candles, look for lightbulbs that cast a softer, warmer glow (2,700–3,000 Kelvin on the package), and put lights on dimmers so you can lower the light when you entertain or want to slow things down. Munroe recommends tucking slim console lights near reading spots so it’s relaxing—not taxing—to flip the pages.



## 7 NATURAL LIGHT AND NATURE

Want an instant stress reliever? Wash your windows so natural light shines in. A clearer view will also let you focus on any wildlife or plants in your yard. Up the nature factor by placing a few container plants where you can see them, installing a bird feeder or birdbath right outside your window, or bringing cut flowers inside for fresh arrangements. A feng shui strategy Kohrs uses is to hang a mirror opposite the window with a view of nature to maximize its impact. “Let’s say your backyard overlooks the woods. You put a mirror opposite the window, that’s going to double the amount of nature in your home,” Kohrs says. If your view out isn’t that great, you can skip the mirror, but open drapes or blinds to allow more sparkly sunlight in to lift your spirits.



# 8 Serene Artwork

A focal point that will up a room's homey feel: artwork, photos, or collectibles that speak to you in a calming way. A good place to start is with quiet images from nature, such as still lakes or ocean scenes, a hiking path through a forest, or a bird floating in the sky. "Lovely weather tends to be universally soothing," Munroe says. Or look for subtle abstracts that look as if they play off calming natural palettes like the sea or sky.

To make a space feel personal, Bird and Duchars suggest arranging your favorite collections or family photos in a specific area on shelves, a mantel, or dresser so you can look at them in an arranged, curated display.

Another way to fashion a cozier feel, suggests Munroe, is to choose furnishings with curves or circles versus strong angles. Harsh angles are also known to create bad feng shui. "If you have furniture or a ledge with a hard edge, try softening it with a cascading plant or a flowing piece of fabric," Kohrs says.





# 9

## DECLUTTER

If you want to have a sanctuary at home, toss the clutter. Too much stuff crammed together in a room, like pieces of furniture pushed up against each other or positioned right next to doorways, is difficult to navigate. Walking into a room filled with too much stuff raises stress levels. Kohrs asks her clients to look at their space and evaluate each item. "Start by asking yourself if your room instinctively makes you feel calmer, more relaxed? If not, then really look at each object. Is it something you love or something someone gave you that you feel obligated to keep? Or is it from the past, like a hobby you no longer pursue? In the back of your mind, do you wonder why this item is in your home? Give up those things and you'll feel better—more restful."

### PRE-CLEAN

"Add 10 minutes to your schedule before you leave or start working to quickly put away as many items as you can. This quick tidy-up is going to make you feel better when you come home."

—Michele Vig,  
Neat Little Nest

## 10 PICK SAFER MATERIALS FOR YOUR HOME

Decorating with natural or organic materials, using low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) or no-VOC paint, and selecting nontoxic flooring, fabrics, or carpeting will help you reduce the off-gassing of chemicals from synthetically made products. "There is a connection between us and the world around us, and when using natural materials, we bond with them much more so than with synthetic," Bird and Duchars say. "We can breathe easier and interact and live within and near them more safely and directly than man-made. These materials are from our own inherent makeup and blend far better with our lifestyles and how we live as well as how things look and feel."





# 11

## CREATING BALANCE

It's always soothing to step into a space where things feel balanced. "If you're trying to create calm, serenity, and peacefulness, balance is important," Langdon says. "When you walk into a bedroom, for example, having two nightstands that are the same size and two lamps that are the same and at equal height feels calming. It feels like things are in the place they are supposed to be."



# 12

## ACCEPT IMPERFECTIONS

Peaceful retreats are also about embracing the beauty in the imperfect and the incomplete. *Wabi sabi* is a Japanese philosophical approach that is gaining recognition for its welcoming of simplicity. As Julie Pointer Adams explains in her book *Wabi-Sabi Welcome* (Artisan, 2017), this philosophy is a combination of two different words. "Wabi means something like simplicity, humility, and living in tune with nature; it describes someone who is content with little and makes the most of whatever he or she has, always moving toward having less," Adams writes. "Sabi, on the other hand, refers to what happens with the passage of time; it's about transience and the beauty and authenticity of age." Take a wabi-sabi approach to your home's decor and look at that ding in a table, crack in a wall, or uneven hardwood floor as examples of the passage of time and symbols of your journey through life. Don't worry about mismatched dishes or a hand-me-down sofa. Feel good about repurposing items, such as transforming an old dresser into a buffet, to get the most use out of them. By accepting imperfections, you won't feel stressed to create the best Instagram-able version of your space. That's the ultimate in peacefulness.

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—EMILIE MUNROE,  
INTERIOR DESIGNER