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Belonging by Design:

Creating Home-Like Environments That Restore Identity, Dignity & Connection

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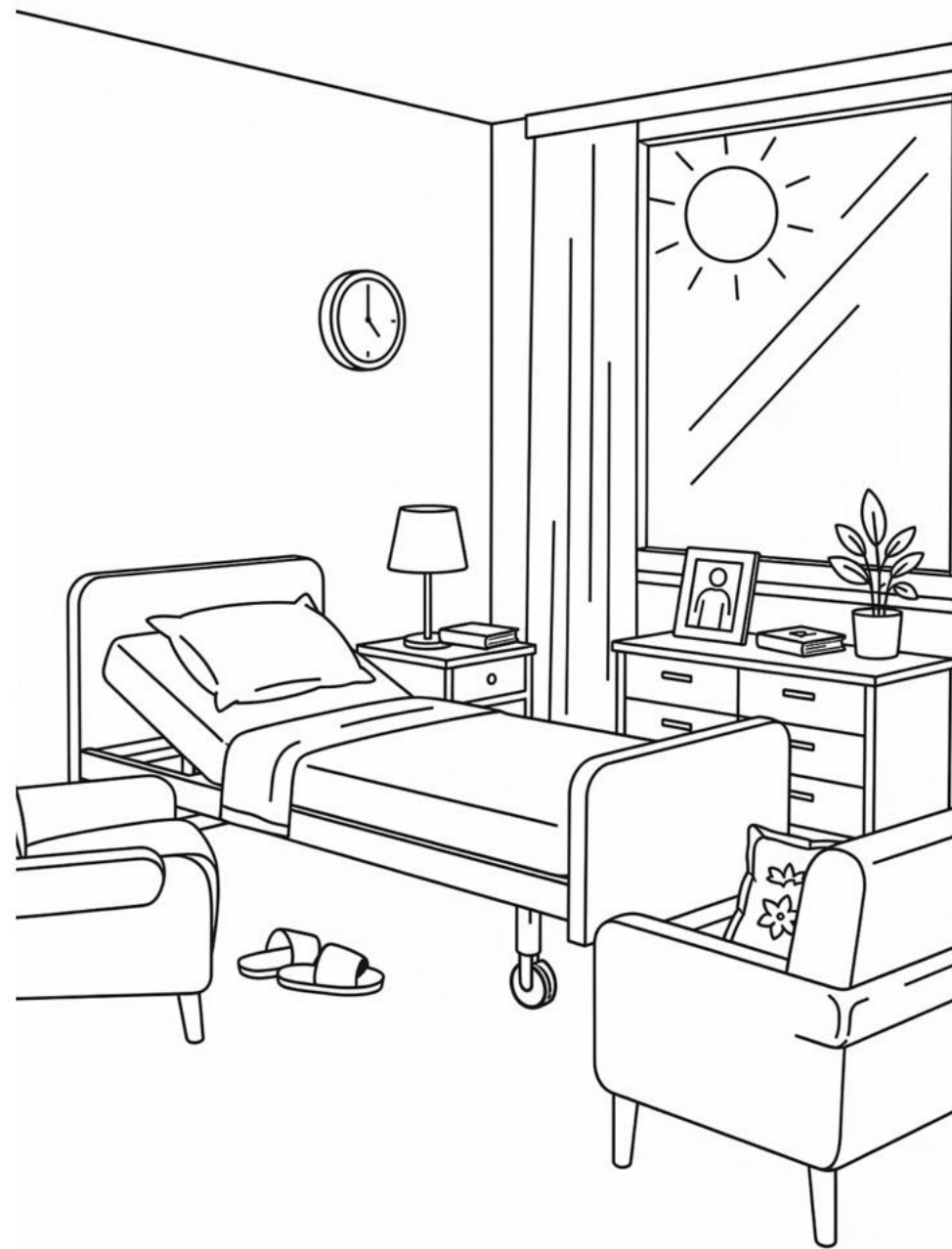
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Belonging *by* Design

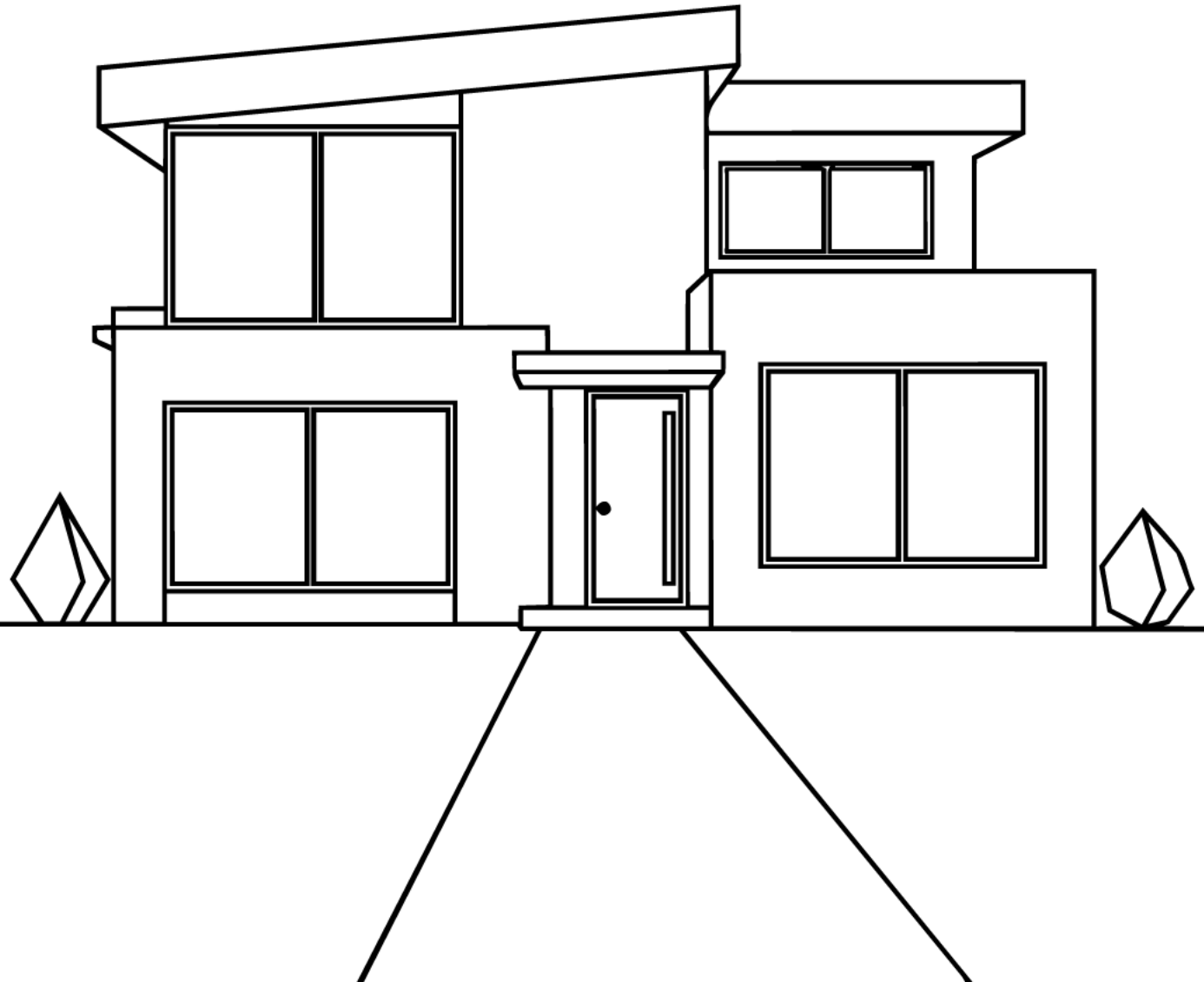
Creating Environments That Restore
Identity, Dignity & Connection



I built a new home

**Modern. Clean.
Thoughtfully
designed.**

Everything a home is
supposed to be.



A warm and inviting bedroom scene. In the center is a bed with a black metal frame, topped with a colorful quilted bedspread featuring star patterns. Two white pillows are propped up against the headboard. To the left of the bed is a wooden nightstand with a white lace doily, a lamp with a pleated shade, and a small framed photo. To the right is another wooden nightstand with a lamp, a vase of flowers, and several small framed photos. A tall wooden hat rack stands to the left of the bed, holding three hats. On the wall above the bed are a framed landscape painting, an oval mirror, and a straw hat. A large framed picture hangs on the left wall. The room is lit with soft, warm light from the lamps.

**But This Is
Where I Feel
At Peace**

Why This Room Works

**This is where I
feel safe**

Surrounded by the
familiar, protected by
memory

I

**This is where I
feel regulated**

My nervous system
relaxes, my breathing
deepens

II

**This is where I
feel like myself**

Every object reflects
who I am and where
I came from

III

This Is the Long-Term Care Reality

Residents don't lose home all at once.

They lose it piece by piece.

Through safety decisions
Through efficiency
Through well intentioned policies

Each change is small.
Together, they erase **identity**.



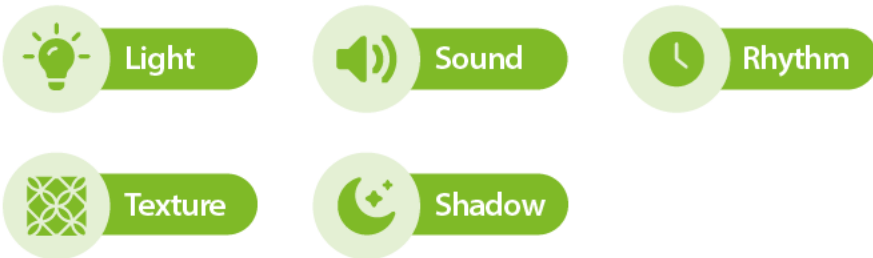


People Experience the Room—Not the Equipment

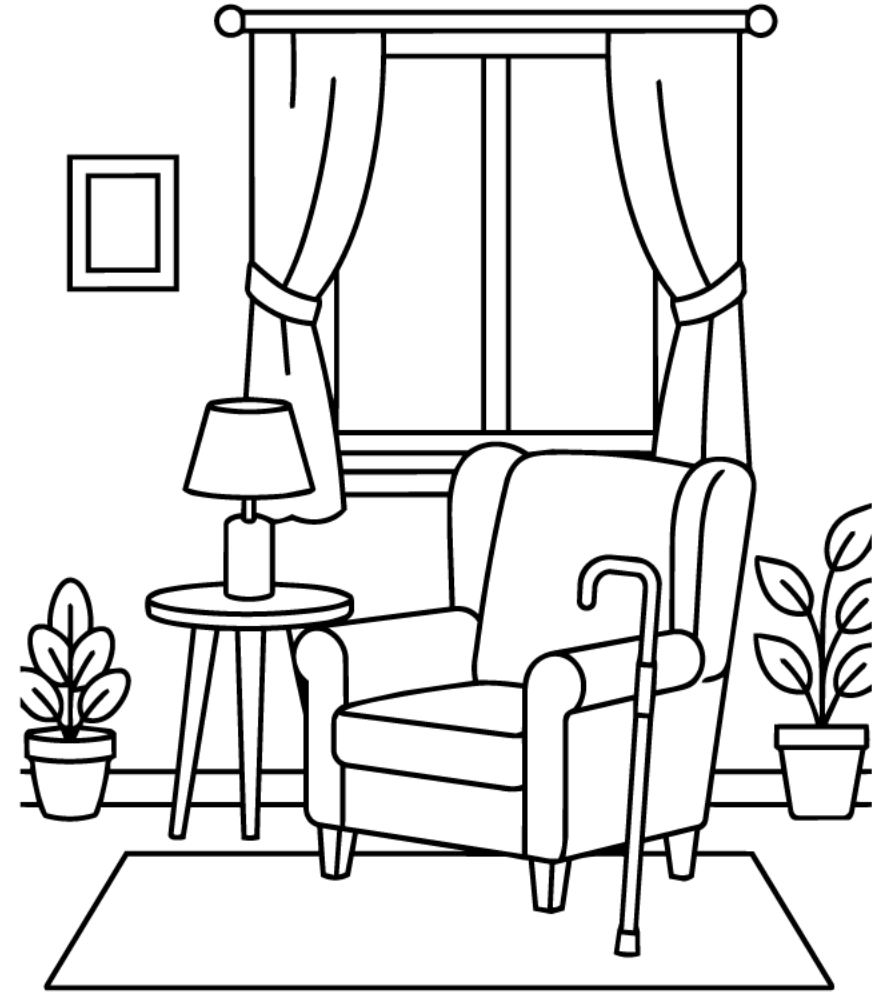
Residents don't process environments clinically. They experience them emotionally.

What feels neutral to us can feel threatening to them.

Design must consider the **full sensory experience**:



Safety isn't just what we install—it's what residents feel.



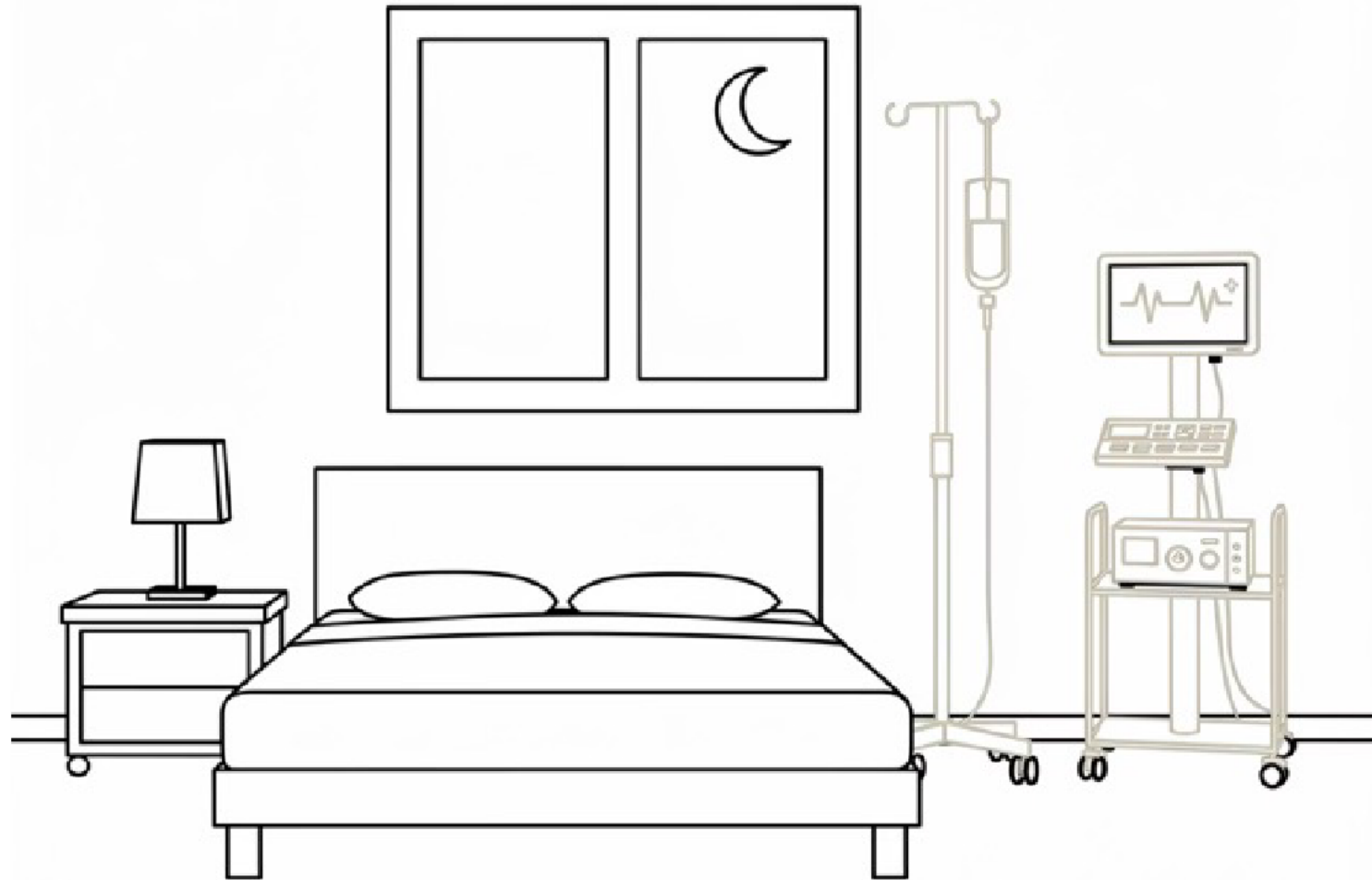
A Real Example: A Small Detail

A ceiling lift was installed correctly
in a resident's room.

Everything was done correctly.
Equipment worked.
Staff were trained.

But something changed.

The residents became increasingly
restless—especially at night.



The Detail That Mattered

A red indicator light facing the bed.

During the day, it went unnoticed. At night, it became something else.

To the resident, it felt like someone watching—an unblinking presence in the room.



Nothing else had changed.

No new medications.
No change in condition.
No staffing changes.

The mystery deepened.

What staff observed:

- Increased restlessness
- Poor sleep
- Fear and distress



The Fix Was Simple

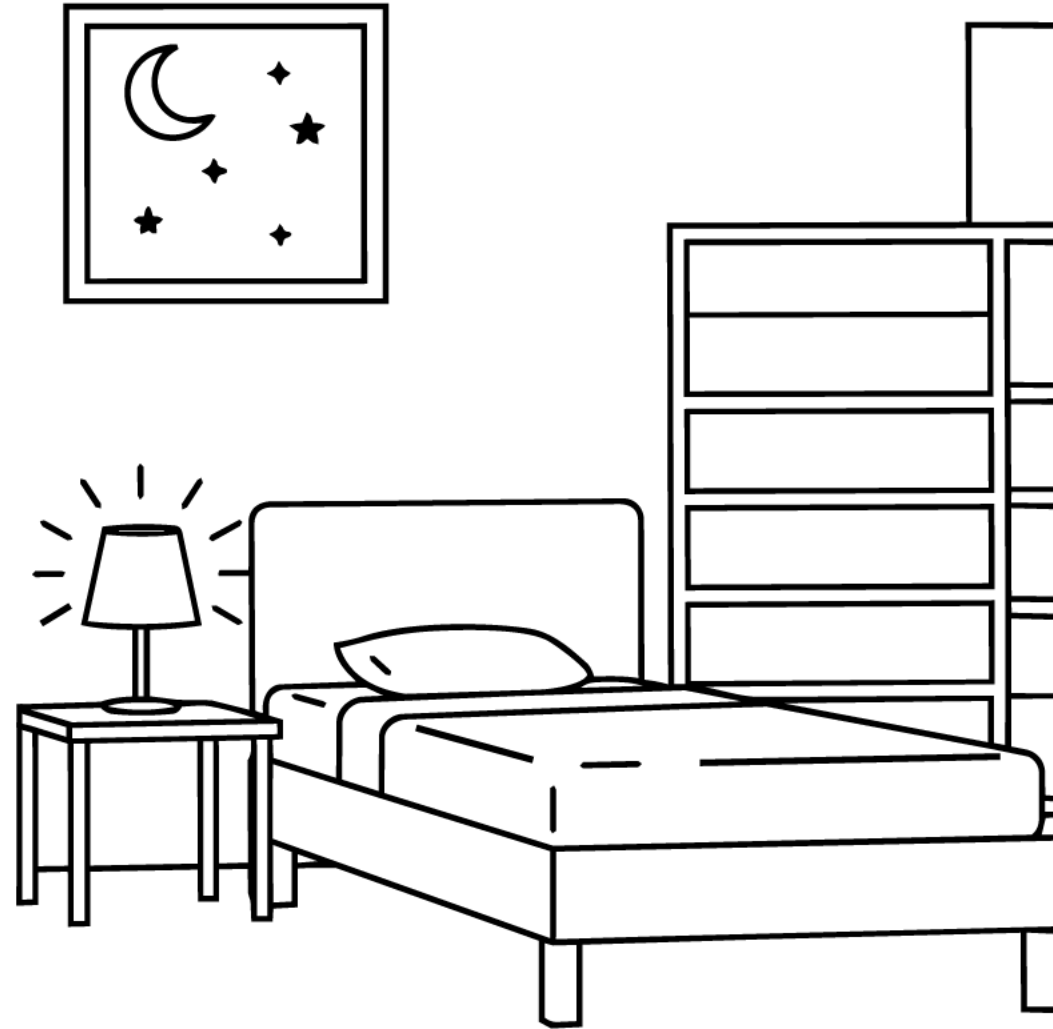
The light was repositioned out of the resident's line of sight. Nothing was removed, nothing was replaced, and there was no cost. The behaviors resolved, sleep improved, and the room felt safe again.

What This Teaches Us

Environments change at night. What feels neutral to us can feel threatening to residents. Design must consider:



Safety isn't just what we install—it's what residents feel.



The 3 Pillars of Belonging

Evidence-informed drivers of quality of life in LTC

(Berkovic et al., 2023; Kitwood, 1997; Van der Weide et al., 2022)

1. Identity

Environment reflects who the resident is- not just what they need

- Personal objects visible and accessible
- Life stories honored in daily interactions
- Preferences embedded in routines



2. Autonomy

Meaningful choices that preserve dignity, control, and self-direction

- When to wake, eat, and rest
- How to spend time
- Who to spend it with



3. Connection

Relationships and roles that create meaning and purpose

- Contribution to the household
- Authentic relationships
- Being needed, not just cared for



Pillar #1: Identity

Personalization isn't enough.

Residents need more than reminders-
they need ways to feel like themselves.

Identity anchors are familiar:

- Sights
- Sounds
- Textures
- Routines

That reconnect a person
to self when memory
and language fade.

When words fail, the senses remain.

Why this works:

Sensory and emotional
memory are often
preserved longer in
dementia.

(Golby et al., 2005)



Identity Anchors: 5-Sense Model

Choose 2-3 anchors per resident across different sensory channels. These become the resident's regulation toolkit.

Visual

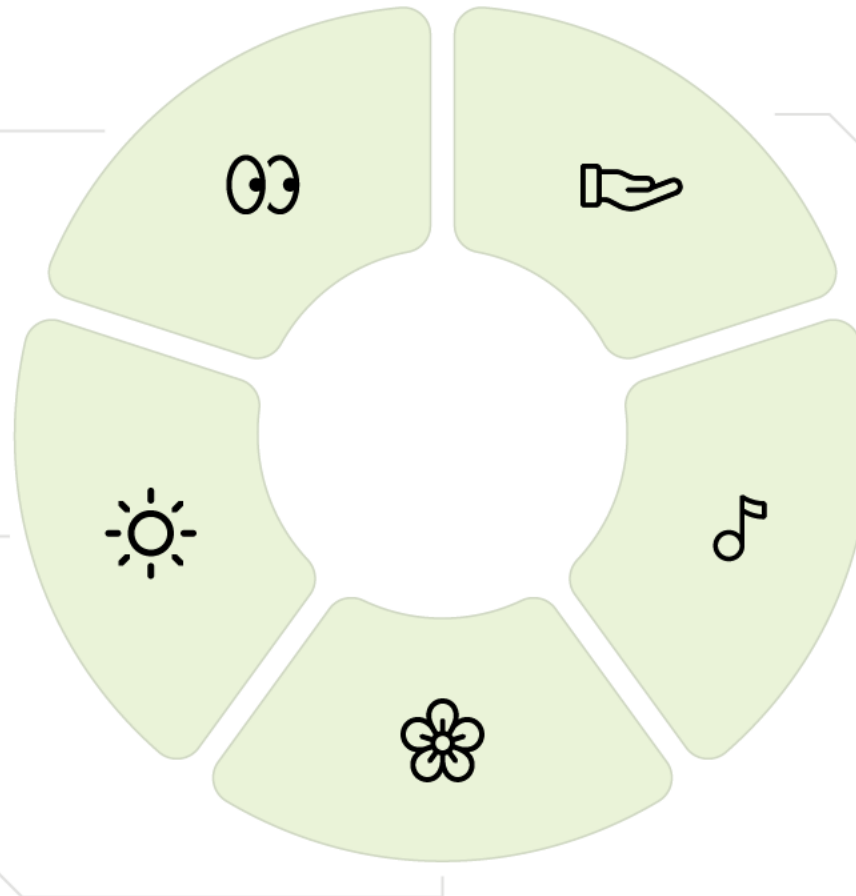
A signature object always in the same place—a clock, a figurine, a specific chair

Routine

One non-negotiable daily rhythm—morning coffee ritual, evening walk, afternoon reading

Scent

An approved familiar scent—lavender, coffee, pine, bread—used thoughtfully



Tactile

Something to hold and touch—a quilt, a favorite sweater, smooth stones, textured fabric

Sound

A 3-song playlist of deeply familiar music from their era, played at key moments

Pillar #2: Autonomy

Autonomy is not the same as independence.
It is the experience of having a say.

Where Autonomy Is Lost

- Wake times are decided for the resident
- Meals arrive on a schedule, not a preference
- Bathing happens when staff availability allows
- Daily routines become fixed and familiar, but not flexible

Where Autonomy Can Be Restored

- Choosing when to wake or rest
- Selecting what to wear
- Deciding how to spend time
- Choosing who to engage with

Small choices → restored control
Restored control → reduced distress

(Decl & Ryan, 2000; van der Welde et al., 2022)



Pillar #3: Connection

Belonging doesn't come from care alone.
It grows through connection.

People need more than interaction—they need to feel:

- Known
- Included
- Valued

Without Connection

- Isolation increases
- Distress and behaviors rise
- People feel like recipients of care

With Connection

- People feel seen
- People feel valued
- People feel like they belong

Connection is not just a social extra—it is a design responsibility.

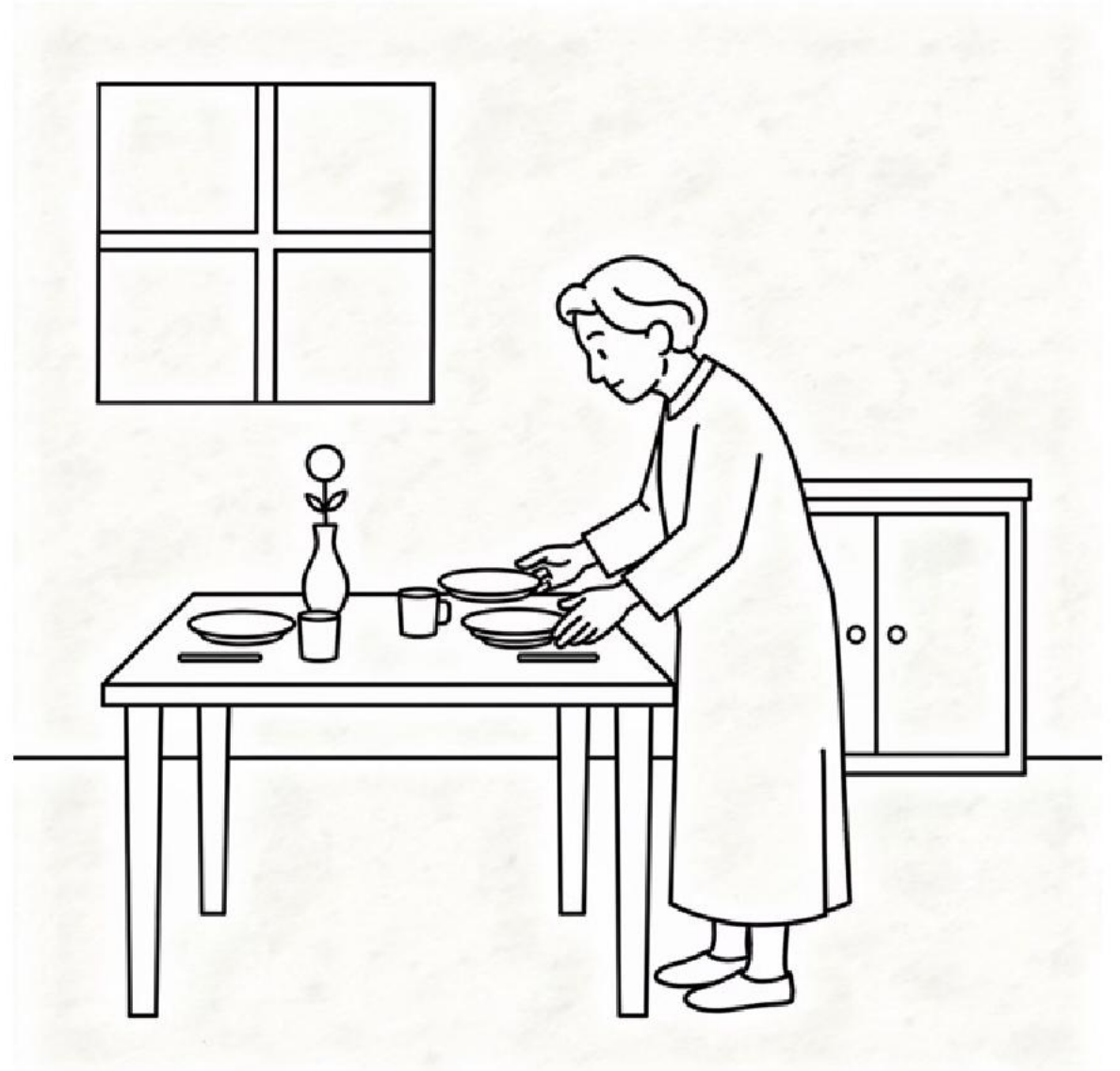
(Drageset et al., 2015)

Roles Create Connection

**Activities entertain.
Roles restore dignity.**

There's a profound difference between filling time and fulfilling purpose.

Activities are something we do to residents. Roles are something residents **are**—contributors, helpers, essential members of the household.





Why Roles Matter

Helplessness

When people have nothing meaningful to do, distress and responsive behaviors increase

1

Purpose

When people have roles and responsibilities, anxiety decreases and engagement grows

2

Belonging

When someone depends on you, you know you matter—you're home

3

The Purpose Prescription

Every resident should have at least one meaningful role—something only they do, something others depend on them for.



Tea Host

Greeting visitors, pouring tea, making guests feel welcome



Laundry Folder

The skilled hands that match socks and fold towels just right



Plant Caretaker

Watering, talking to, and nurturing the household greenery



Welcome Partner

Helping new residents feel at home, sharing the unwritten rules



Table Setter

Creating the daily ritual that brings everyone together

This isn't programming. This is home. These are the roles that make households function and people matter.

Bringing It Into Practice

Belonging isn't created by adding more.
It's created by seeing differently.

Small changes make the biggest impact, often simply requiring awareness and a shift in perspective:

01

Adjust what feels threatening

Mitigate sensory threats and uncomfortable elements in the environment.

02

Highlight what feels familiar

Introduce identity anchors and familiar sensory touchstones.

03

Restore choice where possible

Empower residents with micro-moments of autonomy throughout their day.

04

Create opportunities to contribute

Provide meaningful roles that foster purpose and connection.

Most solutions don't require budget—they require awareness.

Start Small



Start with One Room

Choose a single space to observe and optimize.



Start with One Resident

Focus on one individual's needs and responses.



Start with One Moment

Target a specific time of day or a recurring interaction.

From there, implement specific changes:

Remove one sensory threat

Identify and mitigate a single environmental trigger.

Add one identity anchor

Introduce a familiar sensory touchstone for comfort.

Restore one choice

Empower a resident with a small, meaningful decision.

Create one role

Offer a simple opportunity for purpose and contribution.

Watch what changes. Document the impact.



Closing Reflection

If this were your home...

**What would you notice now
that you didn't before?**

Take that question back to your workplace. Walk your spaces with new eyes. Ask residents what makes them feel at home. Listen to what the environment is saying at night, during transitions, in moments of distress.

Belonging by design isn't about perfection. It's about paying attention—and choosing to make the invisible visible.

Thank You

Let's create care environments where
belonging is built in, not added on

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