

Chapter Four: Craft an Environment That Works for YOU

Environment makeovers that work as you move

Certain words make us want to scream. Well-meaning civilian friends and family members often say in all sincerity: “Oh, but you must be used to moving by now.”

We both have often felt like screaming back at them, “NO, WE’RE NOT!”

As Holly likes to say, “Anything that moves causes friction. It’s a scientific fact.” Moving is downright difficult, even when you want to move. And we aren’t always as ready to move as the military is to move us.

Even our organized friends admit it’s hard, and we aren’t organized. We’ve often thought if we had the months required to plan, pack, unpack and figure out each new place, multiplied by the times we’ve moved, we’d have years of time that could have been put to cleaning out and organizing family files, clearing clutter, researching and investing wisely, even writing the great American novel! Hey, it’s a good excuse anyway.

However, we aren’t talking about logistics. We’re talking about emotional aspects of moving and settling into a new place. Even though we know it intellectually, we often forget to allow for the grief and stress inherent in each move, to give ourselves and our families more grace.

We know that moves have their good points — a chance to explore new places, the chance to make new friends, the opportunity to reorganize and redecorate and to see your possessions with new eyes. But the move itself is a pain.

So acknowledge your loss — loss of time, loss of your sense of place, and loss of your close community that has to be recreated with each move. If you feel like crying, do. It can be part of your healing process.

Feeling overwhelmed by that mountain of boxes filling every square inch of your new space? You are normal. It’s HUGE! Just know that you’ll get through it, one box at a time. We’ve learned that listening to books on tape helps with the tedium of unpacking plate after plate after plate.

Other things help.

- Create a “serenity” space for yourself. This can be in your home or at a local café or park. Quickly create or identify a spot you can escape to when the stacks of boxes get to be too much and you can’t face one more decision.
- Journal or email with friends and family. Writing down your feelings helps to get them out and sort them out. Journaling relieves stress, helps with a job search, and

helps diffuse emotions in a healthy manner. Plus, it's less fattening than diving into that pint of Haagen Das!

- Exercise. Physical activity keeps your stress level down. And we both know from experience that adding on pounds due to comfort eating and poor habits during a move will add to your stress. Take a break from packing, put a pedometer on your belt, and explore that new neighborhood. Or clear a space and do yoga. Or go to the gym and do weights. Your emotions will thank you. And you'll have more energy for the unpacking.
- Take care of yourself. Your family depends on you even more during a move than when you are settled. Don't think "I'll eat better tomorrow," or "I'll just unpack one more box tonight even though I'm exhausted," or "I'll just have one more cup of coffee to keep me going." You just add to your stress by doing those things.

We know we grow to love our new surroundings eventually. We always do. But first give us space to grieve. Then we can move on to the next step of taking control of our environment.

Take Control of Your Environment

It was one of those unusually HOT days in Germany. No breeze. No fans or air conditioning. We were working on our workshop and found ourselves having trouble even breathing much less thinking creatively. So we got out of the house and went for a walk.

As we walked through a group of stairwells, Kathie reminisced, comparing them to the Berlin stairwell where she grew up. "Isn't it funny how we call them stairwells instead of apartments?" she said. "Anyone connected to the military, at least anyone who has lived overseas, recognizes the word immediately. My civilian friends have to ask what it means — just like they don't know what I mean when I say we lived 'on the economy' in Germany."

She pointed up at the balconies. "I'm envious," she added. "We didn't have balconies. This is a luxury." But then we noticed something. It looked to us as if every balcony in that whole grouping of buildings was either empty or packed full with bikes and boxes and stuff.

Except one.

Someone — okay, we jumped to a bit of stereotyping here — a woman most likely, and possibly a German woman married to the military — someone had created an oasis. We wished we were sitting on that balcony at that moment.

There were window boxes attached all around the sides of that one balcony, packed full of gorgeous petunias and geraniums in lush, full bloom. There were two umbrellas, the great German ones that bend so you can adjust them as the sun moves. There were tall-backed white plastic chairs with comfortable and colorful cushions, the kind that you can adjust to your favorite angle.

“Imagine,” Holly said. “That family gets home from whatever stresses they have at work or school and they enter this gorgeous and cool secret garden. What a perfect place for evening meals and conversation. Talk about taking control of your environment.”

Kathie looked around.

“What’s truly amazing is that everyone else who lives in this area can see that,” she said, “and not one of them has copied that great example.”

Let’s face it. The military is making progress in providing better on-post housing, evident in places like Ft. Lewis, Washington, for example, where the latest homes for enlisted families have the bright, light, high-ceilinged rooms seen in new civilian subdivisions. But there are still many dismal places that have yet to be brought up to date.

There’s also the challenge of “temporary” mentality. How many of you have heard another military spouse say, or possibly even said yourself:

- “We’ll just deal with it as it is. After all, it’s only for three years.”
- “I’m not about to spend a lot of time fixing it up. I’ll just wait until we stop moving with the military — then I’ll create my dream house.”
- “I’m afraid to get furniture I like — it’ll just get destroyed in all these moves.”

So many of us get into the mindset that we are just stuck with what we get, that we just have to “deal” with it as it is.

Kathie was guilty of that mindset for years and realizes now that she took it to an extreme. After years of living in post housing, feeling she couldn’t make any changes, couldn’t paint or put too many holes in the walls for artwork, she continued to let that attitude control her when she and her husband finally bought a house.

“It’s hard to believe this now,” she says, “but it never once crossed my mind to paint the walls in our first house.” One room had light pink walls, a color she doesn’t even like. Rather than paint them, however, she decorated around that color, choosing a deep rose cover for their futon and rose and blue mats for family photos. Now, doesn’t that make a lot of sense!

Their house had a small deck backed right up to the houses next door. They added a picnic table and a few chairs to it, but that was it.

“Knowing what I know now,” she adds, “after years of learning tips from books and magazines and other proactive military spouses, I realize I could have created a secret garden feel with pots of flowers and garden art and trellising, even in the short three years we lived there.”

The Facilities Engineers at their first assignment in Ft. Rucker, Alabama, told Kathie that if she planted any plants, she'd be required to remove them when they left. They would have to leave the plot in front of their on-post house exactly as it was when they arrived, plain dirt. After that, she just didn't bother. That attitude stuck longer than it should have.

Now obviously, many military spouses learn sooner than others. They realize how important it is to create an environment you love, no matter what you are working with. It's important for you and important for your family.

Barbara Loomis, an Army wife, is an artist. She can't imagine living in a non-creative/non-supportive environment. So she takes action. When she moved into quarters in Bamberg, Germany she immediately painted her walls in fun colors and added murals to some of them. When her neighbors told her "You can't do that — you'll have to repaint them all back to ivory before you move out," she replied, "So? Then I'll paint them again later. At least I can enjoy my home for the three years I'm here." Okay, we know that we personally may not have the energy to paint our walls twice in three years, but the attitude of taking control is an important one to get.

Be Creative & "Steal" Great Ideas

Kathie really started getting that message of taking control of your environment when she first did the Ideal Life exercise with the idea of adding pieces of your ideal environment to wherever you happen to be at the time.

Then she attended a workshop at an AWAG, American Woman's Activities Germany, conference. Army spouse Mickey Costello presented a fun, creative, eye-opening workshop on how to decorate your quarters on a budget. Mickey's ideas sparked Kathie to research further, to

start really paying attention to what she wanted to surround herself with, to take control of her environment in quick inexpensive ways. She started paying attention to what other military spouses did that she liked, ideas she could adopt.

Create an environment you love, no matter what you are working with. It's important for you and important for your family.

Her neighbor for a short while in the stairwells of Patrick Henry Village in Heidelberg, Michelle, for example, had a creative way to deal with the many recycle bins required in Germany. She bought medium white plastic garbage cans available in the PX. She wrote the intended use in gold marker on each one: Bio, Plastic, Paper, Glass. She bought an inexpensive wood shelf at IKEA that fit

these bins perfectly. Then she sewed a cloth “curtain” that she ingeniously hung around the shelving to hide the bins. Kathie copied that idea, getting someone who sewed to make the curtain for her. Rather than having unattractive recycle bins clutter her kitchen for three years, she added to her home décor.

We’ve paid attention in our travels to see how creative military spouses can be. Here are some examples. We’d love to have you write us with others that we can share in our workshops and ezine with other military spouses. The key is to open your eyes to creative ideas. Share what works and “steal” great ideas. Make your current environment wonderful. Don’t wait.

- **Many families living in one stairwell** join forces to create some visual interest on the landings and up the railings. It is fun to walk up those stairs, especially compared to the boring bare stairs in other buildings. The potted plants and decorated doors welcome you home. And you build the sense of community that enriches your life.
- **Becky Hill carried that idea of creating** your environment to her office when she was the Volunteer Coordinator in Bamberg, Germany. She collected bears. She filled her office with bears, stuffed animals, statues, photos, and posters. It felt good to be there. Sure beat the boring beige or gray room dividers with official signs that we saw in other places. When she traveled to a conference, she even brought some favorite bears and her own pillow covered in a colorful quilt to brighten and personalize her hotel room. Talk about taking control of your environment — even in the short term!
- **Kathleen had a cubicle in the basement** of a building in Heidelberg. No windows, basic gray furniture and dividers. So she filled it with posters that gave the illusion of the outdoors brought in, and added real-looking silk plants all around to give the feel of nature even though she couldn’t keep real plants alive in that space. Everyone was drawn to her corner.
- **Janette Thomas, a Marine wife, turned her guest** room into an art gallery. She framed her sons’ art in fun color frames and hung them for visitors to admire with small plaques that read “Ben Van Gogh” and “Steffen da Vinci.” What a fun conversation starter, an inexpensive way to decorate and a way to boost your child’s self-esteem and pride at the same time.
- **And some tips from our new favorite resource, Joan Gaither**, who writes the “Home Sweet Home” column in *Military Spouse* magazine. A practicing designer in San Antonio, Texas, with twenty-seven years of living in military quarters, she is full of great ideas. Two favorites for improving your kitchen. 1. Change the kitchen cabinet pulls. “I once used inexpensive, unpainted wooden knobs and painted them red, then covered the recessed center portion of the cabinet doors with poster board in the same red color, held in place with double stick tape,” she shares. And 2. To solve the challenge of that “mesmerizing kitchen view” of carport or garbage cans, buy a piece of lattice to fit the kitchen window from the local hardware store. It lets in the light but diffuses the less-than-lovely view. You can paint or stain it to match your décor and place it in the windowsill with two or three potted plants. Kathie sure wishes she’d thought of that instead of having to keep her kitchen shade down all the time or choose to stare at the constantly shirtless guy in the kitchen window of the

apartment immediately across for hers in Heidelberg, Germany.

We Wish We'd Thought of That

We heard a woman speak at a conference at which we were presenting. She described moving to a new home in Texas, with not enough money to buy plants to fill in the dirt yard surrounding her house. So she got creative. She spent \$15 on an advertisement in the newspaper: "Lifelong Gardener — Will come to your garden and thin out overgrown areas and help split and move plants and prune plants — for free." She knew from experience that these are tasks that many people hate to do and some don't know how to do. She also knew the result would be many excess perennial plants to start her own garden. It worked. Without another cent, with just her "sweat equity," she filled her garden, and made a lot of new friends in the process.

From Kathie's Journal —

Learning the Hard Way at the Pentagon

As a reservist, I spent my last five years of annual duty at the Pentagon. I spent long, stressful days in rooms without windows. You could easily spend your entire day indoors, traveling by Metro, entering the Pentagon through the inside Metro stop that requires no exposure to the outside, and walking through the building through enclosed corridors and stairways. Add to that a high-stress assignment, a dull bare desk with no personal mementos and returning "home" each night to an impersonal hotel room. I had difficulty sleeping, and you can imagine the stress. I suffered headaches the entire two weeks my first year there. I hated it!

My second year, I took preventive and corrective measures to handle the stress. I brightened my desk with photos of Greg and my cats and my garden, and with my Koosh Ball, rainbow glasses and Slinky toys.

I walked through the flower shop in the concourse daily, smelling the flowers. The owner learned quickly that I was just "taking my joy break." I walked through the courtyard in the center of the Pentagon whenever possible, walking across it to get to meetings rather than going around through the interior corridors. Birds greet you as you walk outside, and the canopy of trees filters soft light, blue sky beckons above. I could feel my body relaxing each time I took deep breaths of the fresh air. I brought lavender spray for my hotel pillow to help me sleep, yoga breathing exercises to do each morning, and a plug-in aromatherapy tool with peppermint to energize my morning preparations. My stress level was much lower than the prior year and I didn't reach for aspirin once. Your environment really does affect you, and you can take control of it even in the short term.

This is the important thing to realize about our environment. It affects us. It affects our attitude, our creativity, our stress levels, and our health. It affects our children's ability to learn as well as our own.

Consider some of the research on environmental factors.

Take Advantage of Sound Therapy:

Studies show that the stress brought on by noise can weaken the immune system. Children from noisy or chaotic homes have delayed language skills and are more fussy and difficult. A Berlin study found that noise affects communication, concentration and intellectual performance. Children exposed to excessive noise are less able to master tasks requiring thought and deep concentration than are children from quieter areas, and they work more slowly and tire more easily. Even though those studies were done with children, we think they apply to adults just as much. You can put foam under noisy appliances, wear earplugs if necessary, and turn off the television for quiet time on a regular basis.

During WWII, doctors used music to help shell-shocked soldiers cope with grief. Research has found that music calms sufferers of autism and Alzheimer's. One study showed that music caused a positive effect on the mood of 92 percent of people — as long as it was music of their choice.

University of Miami researchers found that music therapy lowers your stress by lowering levels of cortisol, a hormone released by the body during stressful situations.

Music therapist Louise Montello, PH.D., author of *Essential Musical Intelligence*, reports that listening to the right music helps your body's natural rhythms to synchronize and harmonize. You can slow down your heart rate and breathing to a more relaxed state.

By the way, belting out your favorite song with abandon releases tension and increases energy and vitality. In an interview with *Real Simple* magazine, one mother shares how she uses her work lunch hour to recharge. *"I eat a sandwich at my desk, then get in my car, pop in a Barenaked Ladies or Rod Stewart CD, and drive slowly with no destination. I sing along like a fruitcake to 'If I had \$1,000,000' or 'Maggie May.' When I return to my office I feel renewed."*

Scent Your Environment with Aromatherapy

Research shows that certain scents, like lavender, rosemary and ylang-ylang reduce anxiety, while others, like peppermint and orange, can increase your energy. Aromatherapy is available everywhere these days. You can use essential oils in many ways to add a pleasant and effective scent to our homes.

You can control your environment more than you sometimes realize. Take action to create the yummiest space possible, no matter where you happen to be stationed. In fact, if it's a dismal place, even more reason to take control of your immediate environment.

As for those folk who say they are going to wait until they stop moving to really create the environment they want: Okay, maybe we all plan to create our true dream environment when we stop moving. But in the meantime, we may be experiencing 20 to 30 years of military moves. That's a big chunk of our lives. Doesn't it make sense to create an environment you love all along the way?

And a footnote. Kathie and Greg ended up moving back into that house with the pink walls and tiny boring deck thirteen years later after renting it out for all those years. This time they took charge of their environment immediately, painting the walls fun colors they love (no more pink!). They added pergolas and trellises and lots of pots of flowers and vines to the deck. They created an incredible "secret garden" on their deck providing them the shade and privacy that they crave, even though they only expected to live there for three years or less.

Action Steps

Start a dream home book. Use a 3-ring binder and plastic insert pages. Cut photos out of magazines of the rooms and furniture, the home accessories and gardens, the wall colors and light fixtures that you love. You'll find lots of ideas and inspiration of things you can do where you live now from those pages. Pay attention to what you like and don't like about the various houses/apartments you are forced to live in as well as any you visit — and add notes to your book. Take photos of great ideas in other people's houses to add to your book. You'll be building your dream house portfolio as you move around. We've learned that you can derive joy just from leafing through the pages of your dream book. Once you get to the point of making decisions, a lot of your decisions are already made.

Learn about Feng Shui and clearing clutter and home design from your friends and from books. You'll get lots of great ideas you can put into action wherever you are.

Look at your current surroundings with new eyes. Identify the areas that just don't work for you, either in layout or in decoration, indoors or out. Brainstorm with a group of friends to see what creative ways you can come up with to change that area for the better. Other people often see options that we would never think of ourselves.

Some Thoughts About Homecare

Some of you might be like Kathie. She never bothered to learn the basics about homecare, cleaning and organizing when she was growing up. She and her husband are not naturally organized individuals. Funny isn't it how everyone just assumes that if you are in the military you are organized — ha! When Kathie set out to create a cozy, uncluttered home, especially when she pulled her business into their house, she had to learn how to do so. She traded with others who could help her clear clutter and organize, and read and applied information

from good homecare reference books. It does make a difference. If you fall into that category, here are her favorite resources.

- *Speed Cleaning*, by Jeff Campbell and The Clean Team; www.thecleanteam.com
- *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*, by Cheryl Mendelson(1999).
- *Love It or Lose It: Living Clutter-free Forever*, by Maggie Bedrosian and Barbara Hemphill (2003).

Holly on the other hand, always considered herself organized and kept an orderly home — that was before children. After children, life around their home changed completely for the worse when it came to homecare. Holly couldn't get it all done. That's when she reached out to other moms and asked them for honest answers to her question, "How do you do it all?"

The most honest answer came from her dear friend Laura Henry - "I can't get it ALL done, you can't get it ALL done, nobody can get it ALL done so stop thinking anyone else is getting it ALL done".

Laura was her greatest teacher. She helped Holly develop a plan for housekeeping. First, she told Holly how she made a list of the things that she knew needed to get done, but didn't want to do. Procrastination would push these chores to the end of the week and made the end of the week miserable unless she had a plan. So, she decided to do one of these chores each day. The thought of one chore per day was something she figured she could handle.

Laura's schedule looked like this:

Monday: clean floors (mop and vacuum)

Tuesday: Pay bills/ file papers, laundry

Wednesday: OPEN

Thursday: clean bathrooms

Friday: laundry

Wednesday is left open in case you fall behind on other days of the week (or want to work ahead). Obviously, this is not an all-inclusive list of household chores. Each person's list could be different depending on the items you procrastinate in doing. For example, grocery shopping may not be your thing. As a result, you may find yourself with no food in the house and loathe going to the store. In that case, it should be assigned as a weekly task. Everyone's list will vary, but usually everyone can do at least one "unfavorite" chore per day.

Making a plan keeps Holly from feeling overwhelmed and provides her with a sense of accomplishment. This way she only has to do one or two things that she doesn't enjoy but knows are important and the rest of the time is filled with things she doesn't mind doing to maintain a household. The greatest benefit is that getting those "have to do" things done provides Holly with the sense of freedom to move on to other goals she has for herself and her life.

Other resources for your environment makeovers.

- *The Western Guide to Feng Shui: Creating Balance, Harmony and Prosperity in Your Environment* by Terah Kathryn Collins(1996).
- *It's Here...Somewhere* by Alice Fulton & Pauline Hatch (1991). (Kathie never unpacks her household goods without this book in hand.)
- *Frugal Luxuries: Simple Pleasures to Enhance Your Life and Comfort Your Soul* by Tracey McBride (1997).
- *Feeling at Home* and many other books by Alexandra Stoddard (1999).
- *The Not So Big House: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live* by Sarah Susanka(1998).

Experted from Help! I'm a Military Spouse — I Want a Life Too!
by Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer.
For more information go to: militaryspousehelp.com

