

# Labyrinths in Prisons and Hospitals Might Actually Help People Relax



Outside a surgical waiting area at Georgetown University Medical Center, dark lines are inscribed on the concrete. The lines sketched out a pattern based on the 13th century labyrinth at the Cathedral of Reims in France. Families of patients in surgery are encouraged to walk the labyrinth as they wait, [writes Hunter Hardinge for the center](#).

Meditation labyrinths are gaining popularity as a pathway to mental health and clarity, [writes Douglas Quenqua for \*The Atlantic\*](#). They are showing up in hospitals and even prisons. [Karen Leland reports for Webmd.com](#) that in the U.S. more than 100 hospitals and other health care facilities, such as hospices, have walking labyrinths.

Mazes are an ancient tradition. Their potent symbolism — protection, fortification, navigation through obstacles, mystery — means [they showed up in cultures throughout history](#). Some, like the corn mazes Americans enjoy every fall, are meant to thrill and confuse. Others however, [are meant to calm](#). Unlike mazes, labyrinths for walking

meditation aren't a puzzle to be solved. Instead they offer a repetitive pattern that offers just enough challenge to keep the mind engaged, but not enough to frustrate.

But there aren't many studies to back up the idea that labyrinths can help mental turmoil. "I would have a lot of difficulty trying to prove this as a research-based, double-blinded study," Thomas Ferrara, an Indianapolis-based physician told *The Atlantic*. But even without hard proof Ferrara says he sends patients to walk on the paths of local labyrinths.

David Gallagher, the executive director of the Labyrinth Society, told *The Atlantic* that there has been a revival of interest in labyrinth recently. Quenqua writes:

*Labyrinth devotees are an odd mix of new-age enthusiasts and clinicians, even doctors. Riding such endorsements, labyrinths have made their way into prisons, spas, wellness centers, and hospitals in recent years. Last year, Riley Hospital for Children in downtown Indianapolis became the second hospital in town to [build](#) a permanent on-site labyrinth. A [pamphlet](#) at Colorado Children's Hospital informs patients that "walking a labyrinth can often calm people in the midst of crisis." At Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center in Clackamas, Oregon, patients who can't make it outside to the paved labyrinth can have a paper "finger labyrinth" brought to their bed. Even Ben Bradlee, legendary executive editor of the Washington Post, had a [50-foot labyrinth](#) built for his wife, Sally Quinn, on their Maryland estate.*

Quenqua also heard from Nelson Aponte, who is serving time for larceny in Hampshire County Jail in Massachusetts, about his experience taking a class on labyrinth. At first Aponte was skeptical, but that changed when he arrived stressed at the fourth class. "I was just thinking about my family, those I harmed, and what my life has become," Aponte wrote. "I can honestly say that on my fourth visit, I had a sense of freedom."

Quenqua writes:

*Now, Aponte says the time he spent walking that labyrinth—and building a second, permanent one in a prison garden—has helped him grow into a more self-controlled adult. "The labyrinth has taught me to be mindful of my emotions," he wrote. "It's shown me how to work on patience."*

Even if studies don't show a measurable benefit, there certainly doesn't seem to be any harm in walking down a winding path and breathing.