

Transformations: The history of the asylum

THE 18TH CENTURY:

Movements in the 1700s called for kind, humane treatment of those with mental illness, and many individuals began to believe that mental illness was biologically based and amenable to cure. Asylums created in the 18th century were meant to treat through moral treatment, and not to restrain and control. Physicians and others calling for moral, humane care also believed that an orderly, moral environment, with daily routines, would reorder the brain and help ease symptoms. Some believed in the talking cure as an effective treatment.



Before the healing environment could be created, however, the older facilities and practices had to be transformed. This transformation began in Italy and France with regulations calling for increased hygiene and removal of chains- and the end to beating patients. In the image above, physician Philippe Pinel frees women from the Paris Asylum for insane women at the Hospice de la Salpêtrière, where he was chief physician from 1795 until his death in 1822. He was the best known of the reformers who began to transform treatments for mental illness.



At roughly the same time in England, Quaker reformers such as William Tuke also began to advocate for humane treatment with the creation of the York Retreat in 1796, which treated clients by removing their chains and substituting occupational tasks, good food, and pleasant surroundings for the chains and disorderly environment of many existing facilities.