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A sense of balance

Support your emotional and physical wellbeing with the therapeutic use of plant essential oils

Words: Karen Young

Throughout history, herbs and plant extracts have been used by different cultures for cooking and preserving food, to mark important rituals and religious events, and as key ingredients in cosmetics, medicine and perfume. The ancient Egyptians made incense from wood, herbs and spices to honour their gods, aid health, and as perfume for the body and clothing, while ancient texts from both China and Greece catalogue the different properties and medicinal uses of hundreds of plants.

The word 'aromatherapy' was coined in the early 1900s, by René-Maurice Gattefossé, a French perfume chemist. Following a laboratory explosion, Gattefossé applied lavender extract to his hands and noted that it stopped the rapid spread of gas gangrene, potentially saving his life.

Further advances in the field were later made by Dr Jean Valnet, a doctor who used essential oils to aid wound healing in the Second World War, and an Austrian biochemist, Marguerite Maury, and her protégés. But it wasn't until 1977 that the first book on aromatherapy was written in English by Robert Tisserand, who many consider a modern-day pioneer of aromatherapy.

Aromatherapy is now practised widely throughout the world, to help promote health and wellbeing. With guidance from a suitably qualified professional (find an aromatherapist near you at fht.org.uk), it can also be used as a part of our self-care routines.

What is aromatherapy and how does it work?

Aromatherapy is the therapeutic use of plant-based essential oils. These are pure 'essences' extracted from flowers, berries, grasses, roots, seeds, bark and herbs, holding the plant's aroma.

Each essential oil has a unique chemical composition, containing tiny but powerful molecules that can have a stimulating, balancing or relaxing effect on the body and mind. These molecules are absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs, when inhaled, or the skin, if applied as part of a massage blend or other product.

Once in the bloodstream, the molecules can interact with cells and other molecules. If inhaled, they can also stimulate areas of the brain that are linked to emotion, memory and learning, as well as affecting heart rate, breathing and stress.

When applied as part of a massage or compress, this can have the added benefit of improving circulation and relieving muscular tension. ▶





What is aromatherapy particularly helpful for?

Essential oils are used in maternity units, nursing homes, hospital wards and hospices throughout the UK, to help support people with a wide range of symptoms and conditions. However, they are also extremely useful for tackling ‘everyday’ challenges that many of us face, helping to prevent these from escalating into more serious health problems. Depending on their properties, different essential oils can be used to reduce anxiety and stress, promote relaxation and sleep, or give our energy levels and immune systems a little boost, to name just a few. It all comes down to knowing the properties of each oil and which ones are best suited to our needs.

Is there evidence to back this up?

While plant essential oils are used in many over-the-counter remedies and skincare products, research into their health benefits is not as readily available as it is for more conventional medical treatments. However, there are a growing number of studies and clinical trials that suggest different essential oils can help to improve sleep and mood, reduce stress and anxiety, aid wound healing, and reduce the perception of pain in various population groups, including those with acute or long-term conditions.



Mary Dalgleish

Mary qualified as an aromatherapist at the Tisserand Institute of Holistic Aromatherapy in 1999 and has since completed further training in a range of complementary therapies. As well as running her own therapy practice (head2toemassage.co.uk), Mary is a therapy trainer and published author.

The benefits of visiting an aromatherapist

While essential oils are completely natural, it is important to remember that they are also volatile products that can seriously affect your health if used or applied inappropriately.

Aromatherapist and vice president of the Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT), Mary Dalgleish, explains that, “Certain essential oils can damage the skin if they’re applied just before going in the sun, while others should be avoided during pregnancy or when taking certain medication. This is why it’s so important to see an appropriately trained, professional therapist – whether it’s for an aromatherapy treatment or advice on using essential oils safely at home”.

What’s involved in an aromatherapy session?

“Before your treatment begins, your therapist will carry out a full consultation, asking questions about your medical history, general health, diet and lifestyle,” says Mary. “This will help them to select a small number of oils to suit you and your needs. These will then be added to a carrier oil or cream and applied throughout the course of the massage.

The areas treated will come down to your personal preference, but would typically be a full body massage, or a neck, back and shoulder massage, with towels used to protect your modesty and keep you warm. “At the end of the treatment, your therapist may recommend that you use certain essential oils at home – for instance, in the bath or a diffuser – to enhance the benefits gained from your massage.” >

Safety notes

“If buying essential oils, only buy high-quality essential oils – ideally organic – from a reputable supplier, to ensure that these are 100 percent pure and unadulterated,” says Mary. “Synthetic versions will not have the same properties and could even be harmful. Only buy in small quantities, in dark glass bottles with a dropper at the top,

and store in a cool place. Ensure you dispose of the oil safely, in line with the manufacturer’s guidelines. Never ingest (swallow) essential oils.” *Aromatherapy and essential oils should only be used alongside standard medical care and not as an alternative. Consult your GP or other health professional for medical attention and advice.*



Using oils safely at home

Following advice from a qualified aromatherapist, there are a number of ways oils can be used at home including:

- ❖ **Simple inhalation** - One to two drops of essential oil can be added to a tissue or pillowcase and gently inhaled when required. It is also possible to buy jewellery and aromasticks that can hold drops of oil for inhalation.
- ❖ **Steam inhalation** - To help clear the head and sinuses, add three to five drops of an essential oil such as eucalyptus (which is a key ingredient in Olbas oil) to a bowl of hot water and inhale for up to 10 minutes. Placing a towel over the head and bowl is helpful, but keep your eyes closed to reduce the chance of irritation.

❖ **Diffusers** - There are now an array of different ways to diffuse oils into the home, from traditional burners and aromatherapy reeds, to ultrasonic diffusers and atomizers. The amount of essential oil added will depend on the diffuser - always follow the manufacturer's recommendations.

❖ **In the bath** - Essential oils are not water soluble, so will create a film on the surface if added directly to bath water. Add 5 to 20 drops to Solubol or Castile soap, which you can buy online. Both of these products help to disperse oils, but ensure you follow the instructions.

❖ **Skin products** - While essential oils should never be used neat on the skin, they can be added to a plain skin cream or carrier oil, such as almond, coconut or jojoba. It is always best to consult an aromatherapist about the type of essential oils and number of drops to use, as this can vary according to a number of factors, including the amount of product being made up, and where it is being applied.

❖ **Cleaning products** - essential oils are a common feature in many household cleaning products. [Turn to page 64 for Rebecca Sullivan's green cleaning recipes!]



Karen Young

Karen is editor of *International Therapist* magazine and communications manager for the Federation of Holistic Therapists (fht.org.uk), a professional association for complementary, holistic beauty and sports therapists.



Commonly found in over-the-counter remedies, eucalyptus oil is a natural decongestant.

Five favourites...

❖ **Bergamot** - a member of the citrus family, bergamot oil can be both calming and uplifting, making it ideal for stress, anxiety or depression. It's also useful for urinary tract infections, such as cystitis.

❖ **Chamomile** - there are two types commonly used in aromatherapy - German and Roman. The German variety contains a compound known as chamazulene, which has a powerful anti-inflammatory action, and is particularly useful for aches and pains.

❖ **Eucalyptus** - a stimulating oil and powerful decongestant, eucalyptus can help to relieve catarrh and blocked sinuses.

❖ **Lavender** - this oil has a calming, balancing effect on the mind, and is particularly good for anxiety, headaches and sleep problems. In aromatherapy blends, it can also help to soothe aching muscles and joints.

❖ **Rosemary** - considered one of the most stimulating essential oils, rosemary is perhaps best known for its ability to boost memory and concentration, making an ideal study aid. Like eucalyptus, it is also a useful decongestant. 🌿