



Stress and Aromatherapy

by Colleen O'Flaherty-Hilder

Stress is a word that has become part of our everyday vocabulary and, unfortunately, with that familiarity, the more accepting we are of it as being a part of our lives. Stress affects our mind, body and behavior in many ways and is often an early indicator of that which needs to change. When someone is out of their comfort zone on any level they trigger the release of stress hormones.

Stress is the result of a response in our brain which interprets a situation as being a threat to our survival and the body produces chemicals which activates the 'fight or flight' syndrome. The function of this mechanism evolved in primitive man for use in short bursts when confronted with a real threat to his survival. In modern times this mechanism is activated as a result of any challenging emotional, physical, social, economic, or other factor that requires a response. When people experience high levels of stress chemicals for prolonged periods of time it will eventually impair physical and emotional health. Equally, repeated episodes of stress train the brain to prefer stress and that emotional set point is what leads to 80% of health problems.

Over the past twenty years research has demonstrated that stress increases neuroendocrine hormones and an overproduction of these "stress" hormones has detrimental effects on lymphocyte populations, lymphocyte proliferation and antibody production which results in lowered immune systems. The effects of producing too many stress hormones are many and various and every system of the body can be affected. e.g. high blood pressure, digestive disorders, sleep dis-regulation, and panic attacks. It would appear that one of the many triggers of stress is the workplace. The latest estimate from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows that the number of days lost due to work related stress, depression or anxiety in 2013/2014 was a staggering 11.3 million. Work-related stress is defined as a harmful

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reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work. Equally, one man's stress is another man's challenge so stress is a totally subjective and individual response to pressure.

Now more than ever there is a need to find a natural response to these escalating stress related health issues. The benefits of the therapeutic application of Essential Oils - Clinical Aromatherapy - has been known since ancient times, is currently taught in French medical schools, prescribed by European physicians and has a long legacy of addressing the many and varied effects of stress on the mind and body.

In many countries of the world essential oils are taken internally as medicine but in the UK there are two main routes for the absorption of essential oils:

- *Olfaction via the sense of smell,*
- *The skin via massages, baths and compresses.*

Aromatherapy, like stress, has become a word that is quite common place and over the last three decades essential oils seem to be included in everything from air fresheners to washing detergent. When we talk about therapeutic qualities of essential oils we are talking about essential oils that have the correct chemical profile. This means that the production of oils has to be specific and scientifically controlled otherwise the result will be an oil that has a pleasant odour but of no measurable therapeutic value. Essential

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oils have physiological effects on the human body i.e. bactericidal, anti-fungal, anti-inflammatory, expectorant etc, and emotionally by calming, sedating and uplifting. Inhaled essential oils - Olfaction - activate the release of neurotransmitters such as serotonin, endorphins, and norepinephrine in the hypothalamic pituitary axis and by altering mood, reducing anxiety, and interrupting the stress response signals to the limbic system, the part of the brain involved with emotions, learning and memory.

Essential Oils can be added to a vapouriser, hot water for steam inhalation or a nasal inhaler which can be kept in a pocket or handbag.

The health benefits of massage for both emotional and physical well-being are well documented and with aromatherapy massage, the essential oils are absorbed into the blood stream via the skin. Studies involving lavender oil have shown that traces of linalool and linalyl acetate (the active principals) in the bloodstream reach peak levels after 20 minutes. These traces disappear after 90 minutes but the psychological benefits remain for much longer. A clinical aromatherapist chooses a selection of two or three oils - blended in a carrier vegetable oil - and the percentage dilution is tailored to the individual. The style of massage has to be specifically adapted when using essential oils to ensure that they are absorbed effectively but are not overwhelming or overburden the elimination pathways of the body. Whilst the oils are being absorbed via the skin during massage

it must be remembered that they are also being inhaled and will directly affect the limbic system.

The therapist will also look at all the symptoms of the client and choose a blend of oils which has a therapeutic synergy to suit the needs of the individual. With stress a client might present several symptoms from different systems of the body. By blending oils synergistically the therapist can address the background condition of the individual i.e. the stress trigger, as well as the symptoms. As an example, if someone is suffering from digestive problems that are directly related to stress, one could use a blend which effectively addresses both conditions. Whilst each oil in the blend has its own therapeutic properties, the synergistic combination of oils brings another therapeutic layer to the blend. The aromatherapy massage is an ideal solution for stress management and, in addition, the therapist can provide the client with blends for home use – to add to a bath, compress, diffuser or nasal inhaler - allowing for the therapeutic benefits of the essential oils to be incorporated intelligently into their daily lives.

Finally, here are some examples of recommended oils which have calming and uplifting properties and therefore ideal for combating the symptoms of stress:

- *Geranium*
- *Roman Chamomile*
- *Lavender*
- *Neroli*
- *Petitgrain*
- *vetiver*
- *Ylang-Ylang*



Colleen O'Flaherty-Hilder is the current Chair of the International Federation of Aromatherapist. She has been a complementary therapist for over thirty years and an Aromatherapist since 1990. She initially trained with Eve Taylor in the UK and has undergone many trainings in Europe gaining valuable knowledge from medical practitioners who have a long history of using essential oils therapeutically. Colleen specialises in treating disorders of the Endocrine system and the effects of stress on the mind and the body.

She has created a formula for change on all levels – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually called Alchemical Transformation Programmes. Whilst she has many tools in her tool box of therapies, essential oils are always used on some level not just for their individual therapeutic properties, but she finds that they have the ability to add another dimension to assist in the transformation process. Colleen has a practice in Sonning Common, South Oxfordshire and London.

