



Aromatherapy wellness how it works

Aromatherapy generally combines the tactile medium of touch, through massage, with the use of essential oils to engender a state of deep relaxation that potentially serves to enhance a sense of peace and wellbeing within the recipient, while at the same time improving immunological homeostasis and restoring available energy.

Essential oils may also be applied topically in gels, ointment and compresses to treat local conditions, such as eczema, sprains, insect bites and improve scar tissue and are also applied using none tactile methods of application, such as, for example, vaporisation (room diffuser and/or tissues), aroma sticks (nasal inhalers), 'therapeutic perfumes' and steam inhalation. ^(1,2,3,4)

Aromatherapy massage assists the absorption of essential oils into the epidermis (skin) and soft tissue below the surface where minute chemical components from the essential oils breakdown into lipophilic (having an affinity for fats, oils and waxes) and hydrophilic (having an affinity for water) components which are then absorbed and transported via the circulatory system through the body's various organs ⁽⁵⁾. The action of massage warms surface tissue, improves circulation, gently stimulates the nervous system and relieves muscle tension. Aromatherapy massage involves deliberate, focused movements yet does not over stimulate, which affords an opportunity for the client to completely relax, potentially encouraging the body's self-healing and natural regulating mechanisms to engage, supporting immunity,

wellness and a sense of wellbeing. ^(5,7,8,9)

Essential oils are highly concentrated, volatile, odiferous chemical derivatives extracted from plants, trees, roots, grasses, flowers, fruits and shrubs. As well as smelling very pleasant, essential oils possess many qualities. For example, most are anti-septic, but some are especially powerful, e.g. *Thymus vulgaris* (Thyme), *Lavendula spika*, *Lavendula stoechas* (Lavender) and *Eucalyptus globulus* (Eucalyptus). Some have anti-viral qualities, e.g. *Melaleuca quinquenervia var. cineol* (Niaouli 1, 8 cineole type), *Cinnamom zeylanicum* (Cinnamon) and *Eugenia caryophyllate* (Clove bud). Some have anti-spasmodic qualities, e.g. *Helichrysum italicum* (Helichrysum) and *foeniculum vulgare* (Fennel), *Origanum majorana* (Marjoram). Some essential oils also have powerful immune stimulating qualities, e.g. *Melaleuca alternifolia* (Tea Tree), *Ravensara aromatica* (Ravensara). Some act as skin healing (cicatrizant) agents, e.g. *Pogostemom cablin* (Patchouli), *Daucus carota ssp maximus* (Carrot Seed), *Chamaemelum nobile* (Chamomile Roman). ^(1,3,5,8,9,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19) Kerr (2002) observes: Essential oils are very effective in treating small to medium

wounds, skin abrasions, excoriations, skin infections and other topical health problems providing an appropriate concentration of essential oil is used.

(NB essential oils should only be prescribed and used in this way by trained health care practitioners)

Olfaction and odour

Molecules of essential oils carried by the inward breath reach the olfactory bulb at the top of the nose, where minute hair-like receptors transfer neural messages between the olfactory system and the limbic area of the brain (also known as the 'emotional brain' and consisting of the hypothalamus, hippocampus, temporal cortex, amygdale and other limbic structures), consequently potentially exerting an influence on mood, memory storage, emotion, behaviour and immunity. Molecules are also potentially absorbed via the nasal epithelium (mucous membrane covering the nasal cavity and sinuses) and possibly throughout the respiratory tract, then via the alveoli of the lungs, into the blood stream where they are circulated throughout the body. The fat-loving, lipophilic, molecules likely absorbed in the fatty brain tissue, nervous tissue and the liver; the water-loving, hydrophilic, molecules in the blood and tissues with a high blood content and flow, such as the kidneys, adrenal glands and muscles. ^(5,21)

When inhaled, or absorbed, via the olfactory system (nose → lungs), essential oils do appear to work most immediately and profoundly on the limbic system. For example, someone who

is anxious or nervous may feel calmed and relaxed by the odoriferous inhalation of Spikenard (*Nardostachys jatamansi*) or perhaps Chamomile Roman (*Anthemis nobilis*) and someone who is depressed may feel uplifted in the same way when inhaling Bergamot (*Citrus bergamia*) or Neroli (*Citrus bergamia*), and so on. The odour profile of each essential oil can be said to have a unique 'personality', which the recipient will respond to according to their perception of that odour. (3,22,23)

Research has shown that certain essential oils may stimulate and balance the regulation of hormone release (e.g. *Vitex agnus castus* (Chaste Tree), *Lavendula angustifolia* (Lavender) and *citrus limonene* (Lemon)), potentially exerting a positive influence on mood (stimulating or sedating the recipient), emotion and even mental alertness (15,16,23,24,25) Damian (1995 p 141) states that: The psychoactive effects of essential oils are recordable by electroencepholgram (EEG) measurements showing brain wave amplitude and frequency. Odours produce cortical brain-wave (EEG) activity responses involving alpha, beta, delta and theta waves.....jasmine increases alertness and attention by stimulating beta brain-wave activity.....the sedative effects of Lavender were also demonstrated, measured by EEG and CNV amplitude.

Due to this cephalic influence, Aromatherapy has also proved effective when used complementarily with other modalities such as, for example, counselling, behavioural and emotional therapy, and mindfulness meditation.

Aromatherapy, consequently, is ideal for conditions related to stress and anxiety, and for some minor stress-related chronic conditions such as, for example, minor depression, irritable bowel syndrome, certain skin conditions, premenstrual syndrome, menopausal symptoms, to name just a few. Inhalation of essential oils may also assist the elimination of colds and flu. Equally, the general antiseptic and immune stimulant qualities of some essential oils render Aromatherapy as an ideal preventative therapy too. Even though essential oils may be chosen for a specific condition their complex chemical structure means that they have multiple therapeutic attributes which work at one and the same time, as Schnuabelt (1998) observes:

There are oils in which active trace or other components induce secondary effects in addition to the main effect..... It is important to realise in any case that essential oils are complex natural mixtures, which can have, aside from the main effects, many different areas of action.

Buckle (2007), for example, observes that a client who is attracted to the odour of lemongrass for its sedative effects may benefit at the same time from this oil's anti-fungal properties when adding it to a foot bath prescribed for relaxation where the client is contraindicated for massage. Buckle uses this example to illustrate the anomaly of professional boundaries, where an Aromatherapist cannot prescribe essential oils as 'medication' but may consequently alleviate other symptoms even though the intention of treatment is to relieve stress and/or to aid relaxation (11).

The Olfactory System

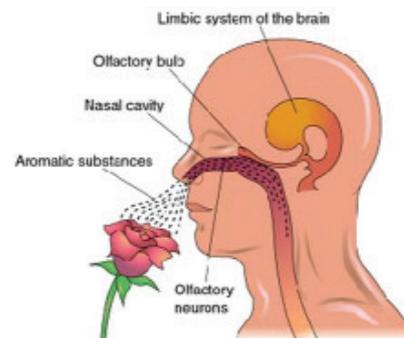


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The Limbic System

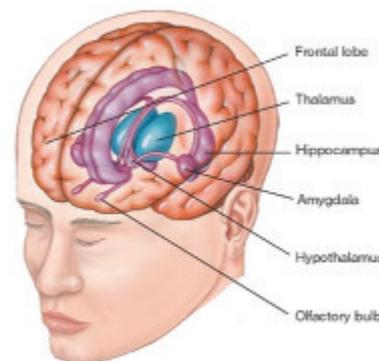


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Clearly, Aromatherapy offers a very valuable tool with which to manage stress and stress-related conditions. However, as with all healthcare interventions and therapies, treatment must be applied with caution and care. It is easy to assume that, because essential oils are generally so pleasant and easily available to purchase over-the-counter or via the internet, that they are 'safe' to use. Used inappropriately, however, essential oils are skin and mucous membrane irritants and can cause sensitivity reaction in individuals. If you want to use essential oils, you are strongly advised to seek information and advice before applying them and to acquire appropriate training if you intend to apply them to others. If seeking treatment, ensure this is carried out by a fully trained Aromatherapist. Consultation is a significant aspect of treatment, guarding treatment integrity to ensure that clients are not contra-indicated, ensuring clients fully understand the process and that an appropriate remedy is prescribed; the discerning therapist is able glean information with which to hone essential oil blends to meet clients' specific needs and ensure their safe, effective application⁽²⁶⁾. **CHW**

© Written by Heather Godfrey P.G.C.E., BSc. (Joint Hon), F.I.F.A. on behalf of The International Federation of Aromatherapists. If you would like

more information about professional aromatherapy, are interested in training to become an Aromatherapist or would like to find a qualified aromatherapy practitioner in your area please go to the International Federation of Aromatherapists (IFA) website at www.ifaroma.org or email at office@ifaroma.org

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