

Aromatherapy: the healing power of smell (Nov. 2005)

Aromatherapy is the art and science of using plant chemicals from plant essences to bring about a positive change in the body. Like Pharmacy, you can trace its origins back to the roots of Herbalism. It has been used in some form for roughly 5000 years, starting with ancient China and Egypt. Hippocrates, father of Holistic Medicine who said "First, do no harm," was also quoted as saying, "The way to health is to have a scented massage and an aromatic bath every day."

In 1928 while studying the chemical components of essential oils, the French scientist Gattefosse suffered a lab burn. Immersing his hand into a vat of oil, he was astonished that the pure lavender essence completely healed the burn. Other French doctors furthered research by use of plant essences in their medical practices. In 1978, Paul Belaiche, MD (Chief of Phytotherapy at the University of Paris) studied with Jean Valnet (World War II Army Physician) and published a three volume clinical study on the medicinal uses of aromatherapy to combat a wide range of infections and degenerative diseases.

How does aromatherapy work?

Plant essences are volatile plant oils usually extracted via steam distillation and containing a variety of chemical components which have certain effects on the body. For instance, chamomile's components make it anti-fungal and sedative; and lemon balm becomes mood balancing. These essences should not be ingested by mouth, but they can be taken into the body either through inhalation or through the skin. Inhalation tools include air diffusers, heat diffusers, candles, and fans. Essential oils need to be diluted before being used on the skin. Essence carriers for skin absorption include massage oils, bath products, creams, ointments and sprays. The essential oils enter our bloodstream and mix with our own body chemistry to bring about a change.

Because essences are extremely aromatic, they have a second effect on the body. When the scent reaches our nose, the olfactory bulb directs information to the brain's limbic system which is responsible for memory and emotion. In turn, messages then go to brain centers responsible for behavior and the processing of thoughts. In studies, EEG results have indicated that olfactory stimulation influences the physiological response of the central nervous system. More fascinating, the concentration of odor does not have to be noticed consciously to have its effect.

Studies have also shown that inhaling essences like lavender causes an increase in alpha waves, a reduction of systolic blood pressure and decrease in heart rate. This all equates to relaxation and relief from anxiety symptoms. These physiological changes affect mood, which is often dependent on our sense of physical comfort. Aromatherapy has long been dismissed as some psychological slight-of-hand aimed at convincing someone to "perceive" that they are now in a more relaxed mood. In actuality, there are studies which show the effects are much more physiological than psychological.

What is not aromatherapy?

Most of the shampoos, bath items, massage oils and perfumes that are found on the shelves of drug stores, bath & body shops and gift boutiques are neither natural nor aroma-therapeutic, despite what their label boasts. Read the ingredients and if you find the word fragrance, along with the botanical ingredients you are getting a man-made cocktail that can include up to 4000 different synthetic chemicals.

Products that have a lot of petroleum-based oils (mineral oil) or waxes (ster) will form a barrier on the skin that can block the entrance of the botanicals. True aroma-therapists use 100% naturally derived oils and waxes to carry the botanicals.

Aromatherapy is Mind/Body Medicine

The mind and the physical body cannot be separated. Maintaining balance and nurturing our central nervous system is crucial to prevent degenerative disease and promote a strong immune system. In certain situations, aromatherapy is a gentle, natural alternative to complicated pharmaceutical sedatives, anti-depressants and stimulants.

Plant essences can also be used to ward off bacterial illnesses, shorten the duration of viruses and ease the discomfort of inflammatory conditions, stomach upset and muscular tension. Topically, many plant oils (like tea tree, calendula, lavender, and geranium) are key ingredients in beauty treatments. These oils are skin cell regenerative, reduce acne outbreak, deep clean pores and remove excess oil without irritation.

Herbs and aromatherapy are one of the first lines of defense in the pharmacies of England, Canada, China and Germany. Focus in the U.S. tends to be on new and inventive pharmaceuticals. But within the consumer market, perceptions are gradually changing.

Scent Facts

- The sense of smell is stronger in women, and usually weakens after age 50.
- If one inhales a certain scent while studying, they are more likely to remember what they studied if they whiff that same scent during the testing time.
- Smoking, synthetic air fresheners, man-made perfumes, and allergy/sinus medications can weaken one's ability to smell.

Safety

- When using essential oils, less is more. If you use too much, you'll get the opposite effect of what you desire.
- Most essential oils should be avoided during pregnancy and the first 2 years of life. Safe oils include lavender, chamomile, neroli, citrus oils, rose & ginger (at normal dosage).
- Although they are natural, some oils can cause an allergic reaction in certain individuals. Patch test first.
- Essential oils are highly flammable and dangerous if swallowed. Store tightly capped in a cool, dark place away from heat, light and children.

by Laura Davimes

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