

Using Essential Oils as Part of a Self-Care Practice

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Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived. -- Helen Keller

With today's fast-paced society it appears that self-care practices often take a back seat to an overloaded schedule. There does not seem to be enough time to squeeze in a practice that might help bring about balance and well-being. When is the last time you checked to determine if you are in balance, at a high-level of well-being or if you needed anything to bring about more peace or joy?

According to the Stress in America survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, among 2,020 adults in the United States, the average level of stress reported was 4.9 on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is little to no stress and 10 is a great deal of stress). The average level of stress was higher among women (5.3), those aged 18 to 33 (5.4) and those aged 34 to 47 (5.4). Extreme stress (8, 9, or 10 on the 10-point scale) was reported by 20% of respondents (American Psychological Association, 2013).

Stress can impact your physical and mental well-being. A few symptoms of stress include irritability, fatigue, and feeling overwhelmed. Sources of stress include money, work, family responsibilities, relationships, and personal health concerns. It was found that only 37% of those completing the survey felt they were doing an excellent or very good job of managing stress. **Lack of time** was among the reported barriers that prevented individuals from making changes to

manage their stress (American Psychological Association, 2013).

Because stress is a problem for many and lack of time is a barrier to managing stress, there is a need for self-care practices that address both of these issues. Essential oils are one type of self-care tool that you can easily incorporate into a busy life and that can support your efforts to regain or retain balance and well-being. Studies have found that the use of essential oils can be helpful in mental exhaustion, burnout, fatigue, and stress (Chen, Fang, & Fang, 2013; Varney & Buckle, 2013).

Individuals have been using essential oils for centuries. Throughout history, essential oils have been used to support physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. Even Hippocrates, the father of modern-day medicine, thought *"the way to health is to have an aromatic bath and scented massage every day"* (Worwood, 1991, as cited in Smith, 2003, p. 41).

Essential oils are complex, plant-based aromatic compounds that are comprised of an intricate blend of chemical components, including monoterpenes, sesquiterpenes, esters, phenols, alcohols and aldehydes (to name a few). The chemical makeup of essential oils helps to determine the effect on the body. For instance, esters have a calming and sedating effect while phenols have a stimulating effect. When inhaled



or applied to the body, these molecules interact with your own molecules to help the body help itself.

Essential oils can affect the body's nervous system, including the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is comprised of the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. The sympathetic system has stimulatory effects and secretes stress hormones whereas the parasympathetic nervous system has relaxing effects (Young, 2003). When you are over-stressed, the sympathetic system is in control. Daily stressors, such as traffic, over-scheduling and increased stimuli, often keep the sympathetic system in overdrive.

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Essential oils can stimulate both the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Essential oils such as peppermint and ginger stimulate the sympathetic system. Parasympathetic-stimulating oils include lavender and marjoram (Young, 2003).

It is through the olfactory system that you are able to distinguish various scents. The olfactory system is a fascinating pathway that is comprised of several structures including the limbic system. The brain's limbic system - where emotions are stored - plays a part in the regulation of memories. This is important because the only way to reach the limbic system is through smell (Essential Science Publishing, 2011; Price & Price, 2007). In other words, when you smell your favorite flower, the scent travels through your nose and then through your brain to the limbic system, resulting in an emotional effect. This is a simplified version; the olfactory pathway is a complex system that has multiple components with important functions that allow the smell to be processed through your brain.

Scent can play a key role in self-care and can help support your efforts to improve your overall well-being. The scent of essential oils can have a relaxing, uplifting and/or balancing effect on your body, mind,

emotions, and spirit.

Relaxing

When you are feeling frazzled and stressed, there are many essential oils that have a relaxing effect, but two well-known oils that have this effect are lavender (*Lavendula angustifolia*) and orange (*Citrus sinensis*) (Essential Science Publishing, 2011; Higley & Higley, 2012). Lavender's scent is a mixture of floral, herbal and sweet while orange is a mixture of fruit and sweet. When smelling these oils, individuals have commented that the scent of lavender gives them the sensation of letting go and orange elicits a joyful feeling. Lavender is a gentle oil that helps to relieve

tension and calm the mind. Orange can be both relaxing and stimulating, helping with nervousness and anxiety. A word of caution - it is suggested that you wait at least 12 hours after applying orange essential oil to the skin before exposure to ultraviolet light, as this can cause discoloration (Stewart, 2010).

Uplifting

For those days when you are mentally or physically exhausted, or just need a little pick-me-up, two wonderful aromatic choices are peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) and lemon (*Citrus limon*) (Essential Science Publishing, 2011; Higley & Higley, 2012). Peppermint has a cool, invigorating minty scent that awakens the senses, while lemon has a cheerful, citrus aroma that brightens the senses. Peppermint is stimulating to the nervous system and helps promote clear thinking and greater concentration. Lemon has an invigorating aromatic influence that can be stimulating to the mind, helping with mental fatigue and emotional confusion. Both peppermint and lemon can help with feelings of apathy and lethargy. Peppermint can be quite intense, so consider diluting (*see methods on right*) when applying to the skin, and if inhaling peppermint, breathe in slowly because the scent is strong. Like orange, lemon is phototoxic so use caution when applying to the skin and exposure to ultraviolet light.

