

Using Essential Oils as Part of a Self-Care Practice

Debra Reis, MSN, RN, CNP, Program Coordinator, Healing Care, ProMedica Cancer Institute

Tisha Jones, MSW , ProMedica Cancer Institute



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.

Scent can play a key role in self-care and can help support your efforts to improve your overall well-being.

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.



Balancing

Being out of balance is common in today's multi-tasking society. When you are out of balance it is important to re-ground yourself. Like a tree that drives its roots deeply into the soil to stay firmly rooted in the ground and maintain balance upon the earth, tree oils, like frankincense (*Boswellia carteri*) and cedarwood (*Cedrus atlantica*), can be grounding and balancing. Frankincense has an earthy and slightly spicy scent while cedarwood smells woody with a slight sweetness. Both of these oils provide a warming and comforting sensation. Cedarwood can help open the mind and bring balance to scattered thoughts and mental strain, while frankincense can

have a calming and relaxing effect on the mind (Essential Science Publishing, 2011; Higley & Higley, 2012).

Before you start using essential oils, it is important that you research the companies that sell essential oils so that you can make sure you are purchasing organic, high-quality essential oils. There are many essential oils that smell wonderful, but are fragrance-grade oils that often have synthetic components added to the oil or a chemical constituent removed. It is estimated that over 95% of essential oils produced are for flavor or fragrance (Stewart, 2010). Essential oils that are of high-quality have had nothing added or subtracted and have been properly processed (Stewart, 2010).



It is also important to know the safety recommendations of the oils you are using. Some oils can be phototoxic, sensitizing or have contraindications for certain health conditions such as high blood pressure and epilepsy. Caution should be used with oils if you are pregnant or using them with children.

Essential oils can be inhaled and/or applied to the body. Inhalation can be as simple as placing a drop of essential oil on a tissue and breathing in the scent for a few moments. If you need to be hands free because you are working, place the tissue in a shirt pocket and breathe in the scent as you continue with your busy schedule. Diffusion is a process that disperses oils into the air and therefore is another inhalation method. Although there are multiple diffusion methods, a cold air diffuser is the preferred method. Although heat will release the scent into the air, it can damage the oil and reduce the therapeutic benefit of the oil. Cold-air diffusion atomizes the oil into micro-fine particles that will stay suspended in the air for several hours (Stewart, 2010). Applying essential oils to the body can take many forms: lotions, salves, salt scrubs, bubble baths, and soaps are all types of topical applications. Unless you are working with a certified aromatherapist, you should always dilute your essential oils in a carrier oil, such as jojoba or sweet almond, when applying essential oils to your body.

If you have an existing self-care practice, such as meditation, essential oils can help you go deeper into your practice. According to Valerie Ann Worwood in her book ***The Fragrant Heavens***, fragrance can provide a focal point during meditations. She cautions not to select a scent that will evoke a memory or emotional reaction, which would detract from your meditation practice. She suggests that instead of using a single oil during meditation that you might want to try blending a few oils together “*where no one ingredient dominates, and a new and unique aroma is created*” (Worwood, 1999, p. 60).

Two essential oils that you might like as part of a blend are balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) and marjoram (*Origanum majorana*). Balsam fir has been described as opening and can stimulate the mind and relax the body (Higley & Higley, 2012). Marjoram helps bring a sense of calmness and promotes peace (Higley & Higley, 2012). As you start to incorporate essential oils into your practice, it can serve as a trigger. For example, while using essential oils, you have found that your meditation practice helps you to feel relaxed and puts you in a peaceful state of mind. When you are having a stressful day, the simple act of smelling the oil you use during meditation can trigger the relaxed and peaceful state you have while you are meditating.

With a busy lifestyle it is important to find ways to incorporate self-care activities that fall in alignment with your daily routine. Essential oils can easily be incorporated into a daily self-care practice. For instance, if you normally apply lotion to your body after a shower or bath, you could incorporate essential oils into this already existing routine. There are multiple oils that can be used in a variety of ways to meet your personal needs. Let scent assist you in reclaiming your balance and well-being. 🌿



CITATIONS

- American Psychological Association. (2013). Stress in America: Missing the Health Care Connection. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/index.aspx>
- Chen, M. C., Fang, S. H., & Fang, L. (2013). The Effects of Aromatherapy in Relieving Symptoms Related to Job Stress Among Nurses. *Int J Nurs Pract.* doi: 10.1111/ijn.12229
- Essential Science Publishing. (2011). *Essential Desk Reference*. Fifth Edition. Orem, UT: Essential Science Publishing.
- Higley, C., & Higley, A. (2012). *Reference Guide for Essential Oils*. 13th Edition. Spanish Fork, UT: Abundant Health.
- Price, S., & Price, L. (2007). *Aromatherapy for Health Professionals*. Third Edition. Philadelphia, PA: Churchill Livingstone-Elsevier.
- Smith, L. (2003). *Healing Oils Healing Hands: Discovering the Power of Prayer, Hands On Healing and Anointing*. Arvada, CO: HTSM Press.
- Stewart, D. (2010). *The Chemistry of Essential Oils Made Simple: God's Love Manifest in Molecules*. Marble Hill, MO: Care Publications.