

WHAT IS AROMATHERAPY AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

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Various kinds of aromatic extracts from plants have been utilised for their health giving properties long before humans were around. Animals and insects can be powerfully affected by the smells from plants; just think of what catmint does to cats. For many insects and animals life revolves around smell.

I view aromatherapy as a system of helping the body to heal itself, by utilising the physical and emotional properties of aromatic plant extracts. These substances can be administered by a number of different means, for example, as part of massage; by direct external application; as internal medication; in baths or showers; as room fragrances and in food.

It must be considered when essential oils are used in massage if their effects are achieved by psychological pathways, by physiological means, or by both.

Directly connected to the above, we have to consider that many aromatherapists **have not been using 100% pure essential oils for years**. Despite this fact, aromatherapists seem to have achieved excellent results in relieving stress related ailments. Therefore, the question must be posed: how is it that despite using non-natural essential oils, these successful results have been forthcoming? The use of such adulterated substances, **must put a question mark over the claims made in aromatherapy books about the pharmacological effects of their oils via skin absorption**.

My opinion, (now backed up by a considerable volume of evidence from scientific trials), is that of paramount importance is how the olfactory system perceives a fragrance, rather than if the fragrance is of 100% plant origin.

Personally, I do not sanction the use of synthetic or reconstructed essential oils, because I am aware of their potential side effects. However, the fact remains they have been widely and often unknowingly used to good effect on the emotions.

SO HOW DO THESE AROMATIC SUBSTANCES HELP RELIEVE SUFFERING?

The human sense of smell plays an important part in our **physiological processes**, as well as having **psychological effects**. Fragrance is a key part of everyone's lives, whether that smell is good or bad, and even if we are not conscious of the smell. For example, a lot of research has been undertaken on pheromones (animal/human natural fragrances). These odiferous molecules seem to play a key role in our own biological functions - particularly where fertility and reproduction are concerned. Perhaps it is not unexpected that many of the fragrance molecules found in plants also occur in insect and human pheromones.

- We all know the powerful effects exerted on our stomach and digestion by the smell of food.
- Many people have experienced a particular smell bringing back both good and bad memories.
- Research has detected changes in brain waves during sleep caused by the introduction of fragrance. Therefore, hospitals should think harder about the effects of fragrance on unconscious patients. The effects may be good or bad depending on the odour perceived by the brain.
- Experiments have been conducted on humans, where fragrances were administered at such low levels, that the subjects said "they could not smell them". Yet, brain waves changed, indicating that the fragrance molecules were still being detected by the olfactory apparatus.

- A new-born child seems to locate its mothers breast by smell (as do most if not all mammals). This is an area of odour perception deserving much greater scrutiny. The overuse of fragrant products by a mother might destroy their infants perception of who its mother is.
- Some researchers are suggesting that the reason women who occupy the same area tend to synchronize menstrual cycles, is because of minute traces of body pheromones. Rarely are these odiferous molecules consciously detectable, yet they are registered by our olfactory system and trigger real physiological processes. Many odour molecules in animals and insects are similar, or the same, as those in plants.
- Many essential oils have powerful antibacterial and antifungal actions, however, for major infections one must have a good knowledge because essential oils vary dramatically in these actions. That's not to say that if you have a secondary bacterial lung infection following flu, that you need a good knowledge to use essential oils, you don't. Several common oils like lavender and tea tree in some warm water and the vapours inhaled, are excellent simple home remedies for soothing bronchial tract infections.

Yet despite the above facts, many doctors and scientists continue to claim aromatherapy is all placebo and no physical actions are possible. These idiots need to think a little before they speak!

Clearly, the sense of smell has major importance. However, there is also an increasing body of knowledge showing that the aromatic constituents of essential oils are absorbed into the blood stream via the respiratory tract. Therefore, a dual effect looks highly likely as follows:

- 1) A pharmacological action by the absorption of aromatic chemicals via the respiratory tract.
- 2) An indirect, yet powerful effect on the brain via olfactory perception.

It may be seen therefore, that whether an essential oil is partly synthetic may not matter as far as olfactory perception is concerned. However, **if** there is also a pharmacological action via inhalation, then it is unwise to introduce to the body significant amounts of impure fragrance chemicals. The issue of impurities in synthetic fragrance chemicals cannot be overestimated. The chemicals used to compound perfumes are often only 'laboratory grade' and contain significant impurities. It is partly because of those impurities, that expert analysts can tell if an essential oil has been adulterated. We should also not forget that the volumes of these impurities may be only 1-2%, **but dioxins are hazardous in parts per billion.**

WHEN ESSENTIAL OILS ARE APPLIED IN MASSAGE WE HAVE A NUMBER OF BENEFICIAL EFFECTS:

1) The physical effects of massage has proven benefits:

- This is known to change levels of endorphins - our natural painkillers.
- Hormone levels have been shown to change.
- The blood is diluted slightly because of the lymphatic drainage effect.
- Muscles respond to the physical effects, and muscle spasms are prevented or removed.
- Poor peripheral circulation is improved.
- Touch sensors in the skin are affected and these pass messages to the brain.
- Body energy flows may be stimulated by massage in a similar manner to acupuncture.

2) Essential oils used with the massage:

- Increases the heat in the superficial layers of the skin. This is invaluable when treating muscle stiffness, joint pains and sluggish circulation.
- The fragrance of the essential oils has a potent effect on the emotional centres of the brain.
- The inhaled oil vapours have pharmacological effects such as: helping ease breathing; acting as respiratory tract antiseptics; and other beneficial effects have been detected.

3) The placebo effect:

This seems to be triggered much better with aromatherapy than with many other forms of treatment. The placebo effect is our most powerful inbuilt healing mechanism. It is so powerful that it can enable the body to cure itself of serious illnesses. Unfortunately, in complementary medicine the placebo effect tends to be looked on as a dirty word, rather than being recognised as our most potent healing mechanism.

In Summary: Aromatherapy combined with massage, brings together several healing modalities for maximum therapeutic effect. The brain is bombarded with a mass of different signals from different sources. It brings a sense of being cared for and pampered which few other forms of treatment can approach. The use of essential oils is a vital part of the package.

The great benefit of essential oils is that almost anyone can use them. Highly beneficial results can be obtained from self-use of essential oils. Only a few oils are that dangerous in unskilled hands. Indeed many aromatherapy writers are guilty of leading the public towards the self-use of some of our most dangerous essential oils. Therefore, placing all your faith in so called 'professional aromatherapists' can be misguided. A few schools are good, but the majority are very poor indeed.

Essential oils do have many pharmacological actions. Many are antibacterial and antifungal in lab tests, and some in tests on humans. Some may be anti viral although that is far from proven in humans. Several essential oils are powerful anti-inflammatory agents. The internal use of essential oils can bring in another whole raft of pharmacological actions. However, this method of use is not generally advisable. Several essential oils still appear in national pharmacopoeias as medicinal agents. Eucalyptus and peppermint are the best examples.

HOW AROMATHERAPY DOES NOT WORK.

There is no sound evidence for the hypothesis that essential oils work by being absorbed through the skin, and thereby into the bloodstream. Indeed all the evidence points in the other direction which is that; human skin presents an effective barrier to most essential oils.

It does not work because essential oils represent the 'life force of the plant'. This is poetic nonsense. Most essential oils are **cooked** similar to foods, and therefore it is no different to saying your cabbage, potatoes, etc. when cooked contain life force. In addition, essential oils are only a limited representation of the therapeutic compounds that occur in plants. The water-soluble components of plants, which can contain potent drugs, do not appear in the plants essential oil.

The 'spirituality' ideas are often used by aromatherapy teachers as a mechanism to cover up their fundamental lack of knowledge on essential oils and how they work. When they introduce such ideas as an explanation for how the oils work, it is difficult to ascertain the origin of their concepts as they are often an uneducated mess of a variety of religious and philosophical belief systems.

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