

Easing tension and anxiety with Aromatherapy

For the past couple of weeks I have been commuting to work by tube as usual, part of a vast network that takes hundreds and thousands of people to and from work, the airport and so many other destinations. Lately, the journey has been tinged with more tension than usual. Perhaps it is the sight of protective face masks that a few fellow passengers have opted to wear, or a glimpse of more alarming headlines on the front pages of the newspapers that have made me fall into the trap of worrying that I might catch something with so many people in such close proximity. I have been asking myself what we can do to help ourselves at testing times like these and how can we make ourselves feel a little better?

I have personally found aromatherapy to be a reliable and supportive friend since my teenage years. Back then, mum would diffuse some essential oils in the house to help calm me down during exam time. My interest in aromatherapy grew stronger and I went on to study aromatherapy in greater depth and qualified as an aromatherapist in 2014. It continues to be a significant part of my life and something I believe makes a positive difference to my life, particularly through the unpredictable and challenging times.

So, what is aromatherapy and how exactly does it work?

Aromatherapy uses essential oils extracted from flowers, herbs, plants, citrus fruits and trees and works on an emotional and physical level. The essential oils can enter the body in two ways, via the nose through smell, or via the body through the skin.

The journey of a smell molecule is fascinating. An aromatic smell enters the nervous system via the nostrils where the nose cilia, or hairs, grab the aromatic molecules and transforms them into a chemical signal. This chemical signal eventually travels via the olfactory system to the limbic system in the brain. The limbic system is the oldest part of our brain, and something we used to rely on heavily when we lived in caves and were hunting and gathering for food and fighting for survival. As life evolved, we became less and less dependent on our sense of smell. The limbic system is also the place where our emotions and memories are stored and as the blind and deaf American writer, educationalist and activist, Helen Keller wrote, “smell is a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and the years we have lived.”

So, how can we use aromatherapy in our daily lives and activate our own potent wizard of smell?

Let us start by looking at diffusion. Diffusion is when the essential oil and smell molecules are dispersed through the air either by an electrical or battery-driven diffuser, or a flame driven diffuser, such as an oil burner. We can diffuse some wonderful and supportive oils, which have anti-microbial, immune-stimulating and uplifting properties. A couple of my favourites for disinfecting a room are tea tree and eucalyptus oil. Both are medicinal oils and originate from trees that are native to Australia. Trees are the lungs of our planet and they can support our lungs and respiratory systems too. Oils such as pine, atlas cedarwood and Siberian fir are cleansing and refreshing for the atmosphere and our airways, whilst at the same time very good at grounding us. At uncertain and anxious times, it is really good for us to draw on the strength of these amazing grounding oils that help us to keep our feet on the ground and steady us from getting swept along by the tide of fear we can find enveloping us. You can purchase a diffuser from many retail outlets and department stores

and garden centres too. I have a small diffuser in the office that is battery-operated, and can also work with a USB cable. It consists of a removable felt pad which the essential oil can be added to. Aromatherapy works in a very subtle way and less is definitely more. It is best to start with a couple of drops to acclimatise to the aroma, you can always add more later. **We should always check with our colleagues and others we are sharing our space with whether they are happy for us to diffuse some essential oils.**



In the evening and at home, I use an old-fashioned oil burner, powered by a small tea light with enough water in the reservoir to diffuse a calming and relaxing oil, such as lavender. Over time, the essential oil molecules are dispersed on the vapour and can create a beautiful and calming ambience in any room. Incidentally, lavender is one of the best all-rounder essential oils you can invest in as it has so much to offer. It is anti-microbial, calming and soothing at the same time and the ideal way to prepare for a good night's sleep. If you have a shower before bed, you could add a couple of drops of lavender or tea tree to the shoulders and stand under the hot shower and inhale the steam. **A note of caution here is lavender and tea tree are actually the only oils that can be applied neat to the skin. Anything else needs to be blended beforehand, or could cause the skin to be irritated. Always try a little first as a patch test on your skin to check there are no adverse reactions.**

Alternatively, you can add a few drops to your bath water. Adding the essential oil to a carrier, such as a plant-based oil, will ensure that the essential oil is dispersed evenly in the bath water and doesn't just sit in a pool on the surface of the water. In case you don't have a diffuser to hand, you can also add a couple of drops to a tissue, or cotton wool ball and sniff this intermittently throughout the day. Or, add a few drops to your pillow at night time to help with a good night's rest.

Inhalations are also a good way of cleansing the respiratory system, particularly if you have stepped off the tube and would like to give your airways a Spring clean. You can take a bowl of freshly boiled water, so there is enough vapour to inhale. Add a couple of drops of an oil such as eucalyptus, or lavender and with a towel over your head, take some deep inhalations for a couple of minutes. This is a great method if you have a cold, or just generally feel you could do with cleansing the airways. **It is best to be mindful when preparing the water and bowl and ensuring that we don't get too close to the water, or scold ourselves.**



Other techniques worth exploring are rollerball perfume balls where a pre-blended set of essential oils in a plant-based oil can be added to your pulse points and smelt throughout the day. Rollerballs, such as these by the company, Tisserand Aromatherapy, can be bought from health stores and chemists and contain essential oils with all sorts of benefits that help to calm, focus, cleanse and protect us. I recently made a rollerball blend

consisting of Siberian fir, lemongrass and niaouli (a medicinal tree very similar to tea tree) and this is something I have been applying throughout the day as it has uplifting, immune-stimulating and anti-microbial properties.



Aromatherapy room sprays are also useful ways of freshening up the atmosphere and creating an ambience whether you are looking for something to help with sleep or generally looking to cleanse the air around you. These can also be found in health stores and chemists. It is definitely worth shopping around and looking for an organic range, which is as pure as possible and not riddled with chemicals. A good reputable brand will have a full list of ingredients and instructions for use. If you wish to purchase essential oils, a good brand will also list the batch number, country of source and when it was sourced.

Our hands do so much for us on a daily basis and work so hard. They also come into contact with many different surfaces throughout the day, whether we are shaking hands with a business colleague, touching a handle, rail or our mobile phones. There has been much talk about washing hands carefully and this goes without saying whether we are in the middle of a virus outbreak or not. There are some wonderful natural soaps available containing tea tree oil, as well as the usual ones we find in the supermarkets. Hand sanitisers are certainly no substitute for good old fashioned soap and hot water, but can be useful when we are on the go and haven't got immediate access to soap and water. Yet many people are finding stocks of hand sanitisers low and this can also lead to anxiety.

At the weekend, I decided to have a go at making my own hand sanitiser. I had plenty of aloe vera gel in the cupboard, tea tree oil and some clear alcohol to hand. I took 50 ml of aloe vera gel, five drops of tea tree oil and half a tea spoon of alcohol and blended it together in a dish. I then decanted it into an empty bottle. It wasn't perfect and felt more like a hand cream than the hand sanitisers I am used to, but it was a start. I was pleased to hear the following day that a well-known morning news programme had also done a feature about how we can make our own hand gels using similar ingredients. The suggestion on that programme was to use "rubbing alcohol" which can be ordered online, which is 60% proof and more effective, as most clear alcohol spirits we might keep at home are around 37% proof. Where there is a will there is definitely a way and it is possible to utilise what we have at our disposal.

If you are keen to learn more about essential oils and would like to have a go at making your own aromatherapy products, it might be worth doing an introductory workshop. Many adult education centres, colleges and complementary health centres organise introductory workshops. This can be a great starting point, as it was for me. A good health store will also be able to offer guidance. The internet also has a wealth of information to offer. It is always good to be discerning of what you find and to check it is from a trusted source. The suggestions in this article are not meant to take the place of advice, guidance and support offered by a qualified medical practitioner, but to highlight some of the ways I have found aromatherapy to be supportive in helping me to ease tension and anxiety at this time and to keep as well as I can. I wish you well on your journey and hope you enjoy exploring aromatherapy as much as I have done.