

DO ESSENTIAL OILS WORK?

Early in my career, I worked in a spa. During that time, it was drummed into me that essential oils had a physiological and psychological effect on our mind and bodies. Feedback from clients seemed to back this up too. I never even questioned it. Years passed. I changed career, had children and paid less attention to my own health and well-being. In the end, essential oils became a distant memory.



TODAY'S WORLD

In the past few decades, the world has evolved. Our lives play out via social media. Endorsement from the 'like' button has become a pre-requisite for maintaining self-esteem and happiness. We often struggle with brains that don't know how to switch off.

This new world, whilst exciting and enticing has revealed a host of millennial issues:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Stress
- Low self-esteem
- Poor Sleep Habits.

At least some of these, are experienced by most of the population during their lives. The consensus is that they are often caused by modern day pressures, our obsession with perfection, self-image and celebrity lifestyles and an increasing reliance on social media and technology. Alongside this, we're increasingly clamouring for natural solutions to these

issues. More and more of us are actively seeking out ancient philosophies and alternative remedies to deal with 21st century problems. Undoubtedly, the aromatherapy and wellness industries have benefited from this trend.



Finally, feeling jaded, anxious and sleep-deprived, my mind turned to essential oils as a way to manage my own daily grind. Time had made me more cynical, however. In a world, where commodities such as time and money are so precious, was it all too much effort? Did they really work? My mind returned to my work in the spa industry. Surely being massaged in the setting of a luxurious spa would make anyone feel relaxed, de-stressed and centred. Still, something drew me towards them again. I wondered if my original hunch could be substantiated by science or were the perceived benefits all down to a placebo effect? With my interest piqued once more, I began investigating further...

WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL OILS?

Essential oils have been used for centuries for healing purposes. Simply put, they are plant essences, usually produced by steaming or pressing various parts of a plant to capture the compounds that produce fragrance. This could include flowers, bark, leaves or fruit. Essential oils can vary in quality. Generally, the purer the oil, the more expensive it is. That's because it can take several pounds of a plant to produce a single bottle of essential oil.

THE SCIENCE OF ESSENTIAL OILS

Inhalation



When we inhale, molecules within essential oils travel from the olfactory nerves directly to the brain and impact the limbic system, particularly the amygdala.

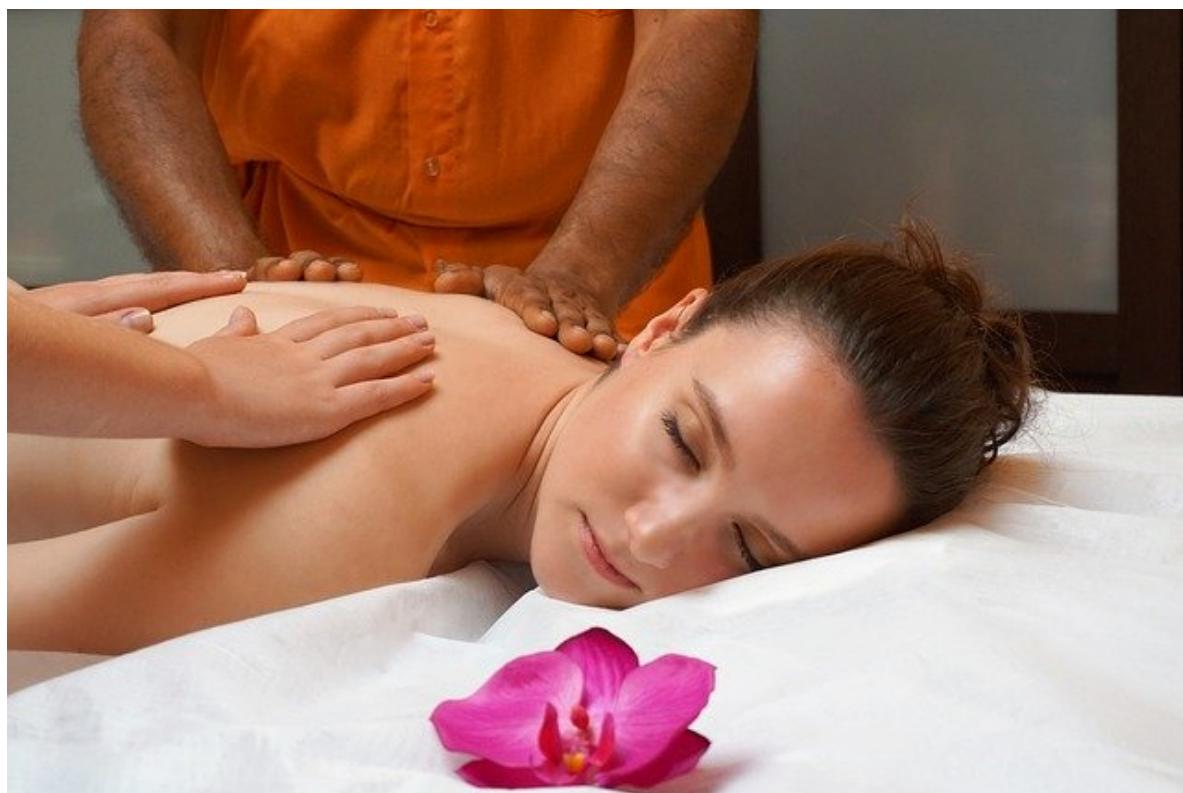
According to Wikipedia, the limbic system 'supports a variety of functions including [emotion](#), [behavior](#), [motivation](#), [long-term memory](#), and [olfaction](#).' Emotional life is largely housed in the limbic system, and it critically aids the formation of memories. It's no wonder that certain smells can trigger long-forgotten memories, strong emotional responses or fond nostalgia about past events. Certainly, many essential oils contain scents that we're already familiar with. Think of lavender, citrus or rosemary, for example. Could the smell of recognizable scents cause flashbacks to happy childhood memories? And could these positive associations impact our mood in some way?

There's no coincidence that millions of people around the world use lavender to help improve their sleep. The limbic system also plays a role in controlling several unconscious physiological functions, such as breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. Not only that, but

with every inhalation, some molecules make their way to the lungs. Other molecules even reach the alveoli and are transferred into the bloodstream.

Application to the Skin

Whilst inhalation provides the most direct route to the brain, essential oils can also be applied to the skin, normally via a balm or through massage oil. Skin is the body's largest organ. Anything applied to skin is absorbed into our bloodstream and transported around our body. In this way essential oils are able to deliver a range of benefits to the body's systems and organs. Absorption is increased by massage, as this increases the circulation in that area of the body. Heat can have a similar effect, allowing better absorption of the molecules in the oil.



IS THERE ANY SCIENTIFIC PROOF THAT ESSENTIAL OILS WORK?

Medical Benefits

Ongoing scientific research continues throughout the world into the benefits of aromatherapy. More recently, there have been trials utilising essential oils on patients undergoing Phlebotomy (blood tests), medical treatment and mental health treatment. There are even trials with cancer patients, many of which suffer pain, anxiety and stress as a result of their disease. Thanks to a growing number of studies into how they work, hospitals and clinics are using essential oils more and more for stress, pain and nausea relief.

One lab study at John Hopkins University found that essential oils from garlic cloves, myrrh trees, thyme leaves, cinnamon bark, allspice berries and cumin seeds showed strong killing activity against dormant and slow-growing ‘persister’ forms of the Lyme disease bacterium.



Another scientific study according to the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry revealed positive results from a group of dementia patients. During that trial, they used balm from lemon oil and experienced reduced agitation.

Whilst promising, such clinical trials are still in their infancy. More large-scale, peer-reviewed controlled human trials need to be carried out to provide conclusive medical proof. Other factors into why some people are affected more by essential oils than others need to be investigated too.

Industry Research

There's another significant body of research. This has been conducted by the food, flavouring cosmetics and tobacco industries. Mostly, these studies have centred on flavour, mood alteration, preservative qualities, effect on skincare, toxicity and safety. It's difficult to access much of this research as its proprietary and unavailable to the general consumer. Some has made its way into cosmetic and plant product journals and these have become important sources of additional information. They also add to the accumulated proof that essential oils, in certain conditions and for certain criteria have a physiological and psychological impact.

AROMATHERAPY: IS IT WORTHWHILE?

There's not enough scientific research into the area of essential oils to provide conclusive answers. But wasn't I ignoring something far more important? The fact that plants essences

have been used for centuries by millions of people from a multitude of cultures. Millions of whom report powerful benefits including:

- Reduced anxiety or stress
- Better relaxation and sleep
- Calmer nerves
- More energy
- An effect on mood

It was time to put my quest for scientific proof aside. More importantly, could essential oils benefit me on an individual basis?

I wanted to attain the most powerful persuader of all, personal proof. With this in mind, I focused on two of my current issues, sleep and being a woman of a certain age, hormonal moods. I opted for two aromatherapy balms from the Scentered range. These products use premium grade essential oils, are 100% natural and are sustainably sourced. Great credentials but did they work?

The ethos behind Scentered products is to use them as part of a well-being ritual. It's not just a case of applying them, it's about how you apply them! The advice from the Scentered website is to use these balms as a mental trigger to shift from one mindset to another and to use them mindfully as part of the well-being ritual, Stop.Inhale.Reset.

Bedtime

I applied a liberal amount of the Sleep Well balm to my wrists, neck and temples, half an hour before going to sleep. Remembering to stop and inhale deeply for three breathes, I was surprised that the effect on my mood and breathing was almost immediate. Feeling comforted, relaxed and centred, I began to use the Sleep Well balm every night.

Over time, this association kept being reinforced in my mind. When I inhaled the familiar scent of the balm, I'd instantly become more sleepy and ready for bedtime. My restless mind had been reminded of how to switch off and not only that, but I found myself falling to sleep more quickly. I can report that after two months my sleep has vastly improved, simply by creating a powerful new sleep habit and association through using this aromatherapy balm.

Its common-sense that carrying this ritual out within a quiet bedroom, will be more effective than doing it whilst viewing a favourite television program with a distracted mind. The context in which we use essential oils may therefore play a part in their efficiency.



Handling Hormones

Next, I tried the Love Well Being Ritual Aromatherapy Balm. It's described as a 'warm romantic blend that stimulates the emotions to enhance sensuality and emotional connectivity.' Yep I definitely needed to try this, especially when my husband seemed to always be saying the wrong thing and I wanted to explode twenty times an hour! If you've ever experienced the perimenopause/menopause, you'll sympathise.



The second I inhaled, it felt like a warming and soothing flush came over me. Without hesitation, I was taken back to a long weekend in Marrakech with its exotic evocative undernotes. How did it make me feel? Actually, it made me feel quite grounded and brought down the raw emotion. Again, it can be said that the well-being ritual of Stop.Inhale.Reset had a part to play in this too. On a whim, I also tried Love at night as an alternative to Sleep Well. It too helped me to unwind for bedtime. Perhaps this isn't what is what intended for originally but none the less, it's another benefit. A multipurpose balm with day and night uses wins for me.

DO ESSENTIAL OILS WORK? MY VERDICT

You can't argue with personal experience and I'm happy that at least two essential oils work for me. If you're patient and happy to commit to using them as part of a well-being ritual, the results from my experience can be powerful. Even if they only boost our mood, this in itself can positively impact our health and well-being. In today's frenetic and often dysfunctional world, perhaps more of us should be using them.

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