Winter can be a magnificent time of year to enjoy the smell of nature if you employ the power of true aromatherapy. Plant essences have been used for ages to change moods and elevate emotions. For those feeling down-in-the-dumps due to light deprivation, the time has come to chase those unwelcome blues away.

Feeling blue as the days get shorter? With winter around the bend, seasonal change is upon us, and many suffer from mood swings caused by lack of sunlight. Here's a tip: consider adding Aromatherapy to your routine.

Aromatherapy is a natural approach employed to relax and restore balance between mind, body and spirit. Aromas have been known for centuries to promote healing. This therapy is a natural management technique consisting of essential oils applied either to the body or inhaled, and is defined as "the use of selected fragrant substances in lotions and inhalants in an effort to affect mood and promote health." Consider giving essential oils a try to mitigate seasonal mood swings.

Feeling Blue?

The changing seasons come with bitter cold temperatures, grey skies and lack of sunlight, which can inflict suffering and disruption in our ability to function in daily routines. Furthermore, humans' internal biological clocks (referred to as circadian rhythms) are affected by lack of sunlight, which interferes with our psychological relationship to the outer world. For many, when moods shift from irritable to depression to non-motivated behaviours and complete exhaustion, winter blues can seriously affect productivity. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) affects an estimated half a million people every winter between September and April. Most agree the toughest months for seasonal suffering are December, January and February.

SAD Symptoms

"One of the symptoms is decreased levels of serotonin, the hormone that helps us maintain a feeling of well-being," explains Aromatherapist Virginia Evangelou, certified practitioner and teacher, and a contributing writer for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Information for Teens. "It has been shown that essential oils may help combat this hormonal imbalance, specifically Frankincense, Marjoram, Geranium, Bergamot, Lavender, Chamomile and the citrus-derived oils," she notes.

SAD was isolated as a clinical disorder in the 1980s. However, animals and humans have been affected by seasonal variation for centuries. Winter depression is four times more common in women than in men. People between the age of 20 and 40 are most susceptible, but SAD does affect all age groups. At least one in 50 people in the UK are thought to have SAD, and one in eight people have the less severe form known as the 'winter blues'. There are many symptoms associated with seasonality. Do you recognize any of the following in yourself or in a family member?

- Drop in energy level;
- Irritability;
- Difficulty concentrating;
- Tendency to oversleep;
- Fatigue;
- Weight gain;
- Change in appetite, especially a craving for sweet or starchy foods;
- Loss of libido;
- Weakened immune system;
- Severe depression.

These symptoms can be difficult to live with on a daily basis, and can range from mild to severe. If you believe you are suffering from SAD, consult your physician.

Aromatherapy: Management Solution for Mood

Scent has a profound effect on the emotions. "There is a powerful association between odour and memories which trigger our emotions." "You never forget a scent, but the memory you associate it with will affect your emotional response, e.g. the smell of your childhood home, a
new baby, a walk in the woods, baking cookies, or a lover's cologne, all of which can conjure up long-forgotten memories, either positive or negative, and consequently have profound and lasting effects.\(^7\)

In addition, the scent of the ocean after a rain storm may evoke childhood memories, the aroma of freshly baked apple pie may stimulate the appetite, and the prolonged odour from a rose garden may evoke feelings of warmth and joy. Conversely, exposure to unsavoury scents, such as rotten eggs or burning sulphur generally sours the mood. Being aware of the scents that surround you, therefore, can be beneficial.

Teodor Postolache, a Psychiatrist who has worked with numerous SAD patients, found interesting evidence that odours play a role in seasonal depression. Postolache's studies reveal that people with SAD have a more acute sense of smell than people who do not suffer from seasonal depression.\(^8\)

It is believed that natural plant oils may stimulate regions in the brain, including those controlling endocrine, immune, and limbic (emotional centre) functions. Scientific studies have shown essential oils to produce consistently different patterns in EEG tests on the brain, and that aromas may also have a subliminal or unconscious effect on mental states. Several studies demonstrate the beneficial effects on mood and depression.

**Depression**

A 2006 study investigating the effects of lavender fragrance on sleep and depression, published in the *Taehan Kanho Hakhoe Chi Journal*, revealed that lavender fragrance had a beneficial effect on insomnia and depression in female college students.\(^6\)

A 2005 study published in the same journal, using the essential oils of lavender, marjoram, eucalyptus, rosemary and peppermint, mixed with carrier oil composed of almond, apricot and jojoba oil, clearly showed that 'aromatherapy has major effects on decreasing pain and depression levels', suggesting that Aromatherapy can be a useful nursing intervention for arthritis patients.\(^7\)

**Mood**

A 2004 study published in *Psychological Reports*, assessing the effects of water, lavender, or rosemary scent, on physiology and mood following an anxiety-provoking task, revealed that 'when individual perception of scent pleasantness is controlled, scent has the potential to moderate different aspects of mood following an anxiety-provoking task'.\(^3\)

**Agitation**

A 2007 study published in the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* revealed that "lavender is effective as an adjunctive therapy in alleviating agitated behaviours in Chinese patients with dementia."\(^9\)

Although there are many effective ways of treating seasonal blues, such as anti-depressants, cognitive therapy, light therapy and exercise, other complementary approaches such as Aromatherapy may be considered as a management method, in particular on days when all other options seem to fail.

**Implementing Aromatherapy**

Essential oils are highly powerful concentrates and must be diluted or blended into unreified carrier oils, such as coconut, apricot kernel, avocado, jojoba, peach nut or sweet almond. Do not apply undiluted to skin. Here are three ways you can use them:

**Cosmetic Aromatherapy**

"I'm an enthusiastic proponent of long soaks in luxuriously scented hot baths, but do remember that extreme heat destroys the properties of the oils, so the water should be a comfortable temperature".\(^2\) Cosmetic Aromatherapy combines essential oils for application to the body. Essential oils applied to the hair, feet, face, skin and body may cause a person to feel rejuvenated, especially when you are feeling down-in-the-dumps.

**Massage Aromatherapy**

Seasonal depression can make one feel lifeless at times (which causes low energy levels), leaving the body drained, sluggish, tired and unmotivated. With such symptoms, many people who feel downright depressed during the hard-hitting months of winter may seriously consider Massage Aromatherapy as a calming therapy. Aromatherapy Massage involves aromatic oils combined with massage touch, which aid in relaxing the body. Aromatherapy Massages offer relaxation and physiological rejuvenation through the stimulation of the nervous system, whereas inhalation techniques are useful for respiratory conditions.

**Olfactory Aromatherapy**

Olfactory Aromatherapy is a method of releasing essential oils into the air for inhalation. Inhalation is the most effective way to stimulate the brain and limbic system. The inhalation approach is distributed by spraying distilled water mixed with natural essential oils into the air, and also by diffusion. Diffusion is evaporation achieved through the use of aromatherapy equipment which disperse essential oils into the environment. Diffusers come in the form of aroma lamps and room sprays, and can also be inhaled by placing a couple of drops of oil on a tissue. Place a few drops of your favourite oil on some cotton wool and put it in clothes drawers and linen cupboards.

All types of Aromatherapies, including Inhalation Therapy, Ointment Therapy, Bath Therapy, Massage Therapy and Creams, may be beneficial to this all too real seasonal misery.

**Consult a Professional**

Essential oils have various effects on the body, depending on the individual's needs and the type of essential oils used. Safety procedures should be followed. Virginia Evangelou points out that while essential oils are very safe when used correctly, it is important to realize that although they are derived naturally, and contain no harmful synthetic chemicals, they do contain many natural chemicals and so are very potent.

It is important to consult with a registered Aromatherapist who is well-versed on how each oil work. Always discuss
alternative approaches with your doctor, especially if you are taking prescription drugs or using other therapies. Get advice on what oils to use since some are toxic and harmful. Aromatherapists are trained on how to blend high quality essential oils to meet an individual's needs. "A trained Aromatherapist has taken the time to learn about essential oil safety, and can pass on their expertise so the layperson can enjoy them safely," emphasizes Evangelou.

Safe and Effective Aromatherapy

Using aromas may help relax and relieve stress. Stress is known to cause a myriad of physical maladies far beyond the scope of winter blues and SAD. By no means is aromatherapy intended to cure seasonal moodiness or SAD symptoms, but it may be used to lessen irritability and tension, boost energy, and offer support with emotional issues.

Be cautious of products that do not contain a list of ingredients on their label. It is not advisable to purchase oils with the word 'fragrance', or list other synthetic ingredients such as Phthalates which are found in synthetic, petrochemical-derived fragrances. Current research has shown that phthalates can do kidney, liver, and reproductive damage.

One tip is to purchase 100% pure products made from plants with no added synthetic substances. Look for natural and organic essential oils. It is best to use oils that are bottled in opaque (dark) glass, and steer clear of oils that do not list both the common and Latin botanical name. "None should be taken internally, unless under the care of an aromatherapist with advanced training in internal aromatherapy (popular in France, where Aromatherapy treatments are covered by medical insurance)," advises Evangelou. Younger children should not use Aromatherapy. Pregnant women should avoid essential oils, as well as people with certain illnesses such as asthma, epilepsy, and high blood pressure.

Choose Your Mood

Many essential oils possess 'antidepressant' and mood lifting qualities, but we should be careful to choose those that best suit our needs. "If you are feeling lethargic and fatigued, sedative oils will only exacerbate the problem. However, if depression is causing insomnia, irritability and restlessness, sedative oil is ideal." Rose, Geranium, Bergamot and Melissa can elevate your mood without a sedative effect, while Sandalwood, Chamomile, Ylang Ylang, Clary Sage and Lavender possess both anti-depressant and sedative qualities. "Jasmine is an excellent wake-up oil, cheering you up and dispersing mental fatigue. In addition, if you're suffering from anxiety, try Neroli to boost your confidence."

Due to essential oils' stimulating qualities and possible affect on the brain, one may find much hope in chasing the winter blues away with Aromatherapy applications.

Look for essential oils that generate a positive emotion in you, then set them up in your daily routine. Evangelou comments on three of her much-loved anti-depressant oils:

- Bergamot
  I love the tangy freshness of the citrus family and feel Bergamot is one of the most versatile. Its delicate orange-lemon balsamic scent is refreshing, uplifting, calming and balancing to the mind, body and spirit.

It has a multi-layered effect on the emotions, most beneficial in relieving stress, tension, anxiety, depression, frustration and anger. This oil can help you regain self-confidence, while restoring your vitality, building immunity and evoking warmth and joy in your heart;

- Clary Sage
  Incomparable is the only way to describe the musky, earthy yet bright, sweet and floral scent of this intoxicating, sensuous oil, which can cause euphoria in large amounts. The effects of this enigmatic oil are primarily psychological; said to give courage and feed the soul, Clary Sage can help regenerate your energy, balance extreme emotions, inspire your mind, encourage feelings of well-being and help you put things in perspective. It may also help with deep-seated tension, sadness, stress and nervousness, bringing about inner tranquility;

- Lemongrass
  The pleasantly sharp, sweet lemony scent is like a cool stimulating shower. Not traditionally thought of as an 'anti-depressant', this oil has an intense radiant energy which has an invigorating and revitalizing effect – perfect to pick you up and get you going on those cold dreary winter mornings. This oil can help combat grumpiness, irritability and tiredness, especially when travelling. Reviving and energizing, it stimulates the left brain, aids concentration and brings about fresh ideas – helpful if you are feeling blocked and in need of inspiration.

References

2. Personal Interview. Aromatherapist Virginia Evangelou (Ms), Greece. Certified practitioner, teacher, researcher and consultant.


Supplemental Reading List


About the Author

Wendy Gist MS Natural Health is a Southwest-based freelance writer who often writes about healthy living. She contributes articles to several leading publications, such as Alternative Medicine, Better Nutrition, Her Sports and Fitness, Herbs for Health, Pilates Style, Today's Diet and Nutrition and Urban Male. She finds that writing is the best approach to helping others. She may be contacted via gist@cybermesa.com; www.gist-ink.com

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