

The Power Of Smell

Our senses allow us to experience the world, but their effects can be more powerful than we realize. Our sense of smell has an enormous impact on our mood, our health, and our state of mind. **By Mira Khreino**



In this day and age, our senses are constantly being over-stimulated. Bombarded with images from our TV screens, smartphones, computers, and billboards, our sense of vision seldom rests. Car horns, sirens, music, and talk vibrate in our ears for most of the day. Perfumes, deodorants, and air fresheners fragrance our every environment and we can't seem to escape a whiff of this or a waft of that. Our sense of touch is awakened on a momentary basis, from the fabrics we wear to the feeling of air conditioning on our skin. Different cuisines and flavors are more accessible to us and our taste buds are repeatedly being tantalized with all kinds of sweet, sour, bitter, and salty combinations.

However, of all the senses, the sense of smell is the most primitive. It is connected to the limbic portion of the brain — the same part of the brain that holds emotions, memory, and creativity — explaining why certain scents stir our memories and emotions so profoundly. The brain's limbic system is connected to the

pituitary gland and hypothalamus, which control the release of hormones that affect our appetite, nervous system, body temperature, stress levels, and concentration.

Our sense of smell also plays a vital role in our survival; it gives us information about our environment and alerts us to any threats therein. Olfaction identifies danger (for example, burning), spoiled food (rotting), mates (pheromones), as well as sensual pleasures and perfumes. In fact, humans can distinguish more than 10,000 different odor molecules, and 80 percent of what we taste is actually due to our sense of smell. With every inhalation since birth, our smell receptors have been noting all the scents that have passed through our nostrils. From the smell of our mother's skin shortly after birth to the smell of the gym locker room, the smell of coffee first thing in the morning to the sun tanning lotion we used as teenagers, all these smells have been registered and are logged in our memory, still having the power to reawaken powerful feelings. These are called our scent memories.



Senses Working Overtime

Our senses play a huge role in how we think, feel, and behave.

The colors we see affect us in different ways; for example, reds are fiery and stimulate, while blues are soothing and calm. The music we listen to also affects our frame of mind; cortisol and adrenaline levels increase with more drum-based and treble-based music, while the parasympathetic system (the system that relaxes us and reverses the fight-or-flight reaction) activates with more relaxing melodies. However, even though most of us become over-reliant on the senses of sight and sound, our other senses are just as important and play a crucial role in influencing our emotions. The way we are touched influences our mood — a soothing stroke on the upper arm is quite different from a harsh punch in the belly. Different tastes in the mouth have different associations and affects on us; for example, chills will stimulate and energize, as opposed to watermelon that will cool and rebalance.

Whereas we realize the impact of four of our senses on our mood, we are not as aware of the way scents and smells influence us. This is despite the fact that it is now widely accepted that smell has a greater link to emotion, cravings, sexuality, memories, and behavior than the rest of our senses. The sense of smell first triggers the deepest, most ancient part of the brain, affecting the limbic system before the thinking cortex. Thus, when we smell a particular fragrance, it triggers an emotional response before it is even cognitively recognized and processed.

Interestingly, most of our olfactory likes and dislikes are based on emotional associations — in other words, our scent preferences are dependent on our past experiences. Furthermore, smells can influence our current mood according to the nature of the past experience they are associated with. For example, if an odor is associated with something pleasant, we are likely to remember it, smile, and be happy, reliving that pleasurable feeling in the present.

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The Wonderful World Of Aromatherapy

If scents have such a huge influence on mood and behavior, then why not use them to stimulate a desired feeling?

Studies have shown that people exposed to plant odors are calmer, more alert, and in a better mood than those in a plant-free environment. Research also suggests that scents such as coffee, orange, and licorice give people longer attention spans, and a sleep disorder clinic in Heidelberg found that smell influenced the quality of dreams, with a scent of flowers before bedtime resulting in a peaceful dream time. Clinical trials at Maryland University have shown that lavender can help reduce anxiety and insomnia and promote relaxation. Smelling peppermint before a race has helped increase performance and concentration for runners.

With an increasing mass of research behind the way smells affect our mood, aromatherapy has gained significant popularity in the past few decades. Aromatherapy is the therapeutic use of aromatic plant compounds and essential oils to treat physical ailments and symptoms, as well as to enhance emotional and mental health and wellbeing. It is the essential oils in plants that give them their characteristic smell (and flavor). For example, when we smell a flower or enjoy lemon zest in a drink, it is the essential oil that we are picking up on. Each essential oil has specific properties that, when used therapeutically, can result in a desired physiological and psychological effect. Aromatherapy oils are also known to support and strengthen the body's defense system and help fight infection, as many have anti-viral, anti-bacterial, antiseptic, antifungal, and immune-stimulant properties.

The quickest way for an essential oil to enter the body is through the “direct inhalation” of its vapor, in which the vapor enters the nostrils and mixes with the mucous membrane directly. “Aerial diffusion” is also a popular method, wherein oil is placed into a burner and evaporates into the air, diffusing the scent throughout the space. Another option is “topical application.” The application of a diluted oil onto the skin — usually through massage — gives the benefit of the oil as well as the added benefit of therapeutic touch.

Note: Do not use essential oils if you are pregnant. Do not use essential oils neat and undiluted; they are powerful and deserve respect. Always follow instructions and, if in doubt, ask a professional.

Top 10 Essential Oils

1 Frankincense

Often used in ancient Egypt's skin care products and now widely used in Indian and Chinese incense, frankincense oil is sweet and spicy. Its ability to boost concentration is indicated in its use to aid meditation.

When To Use: Frankincense is a tonifying oil with anti-inflammatory properties. Its main action on the nervous system is to calm and lift spirits, while at the same time increasing energy. It is often used to alleviate anxiety and tension and is beneficial if you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed by your responsibilities, living at too fast a pace, or feeling that your life is out of harmony.

2 Ylang-ylang

Produced from the flowers of a tall tree native to tropical Southeast Asia, ylang-ylang has been used in medicines and creams for millennia. Sweet and exotic with a flowery scent, ylang-ylang is a potent and powerful oil. It is also a base note for many renowned oriental and floral perfumes.

When To Use: It has a calming, sedating effect, creating a sense of relaxed wellbeing. It is useful in the treatment of anxiety, depression, stress, and tension. It has been found to reduce rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, and fast breathing. It also has an excellent reputation as an aphrodisiac. It is useful for when you find it difficult to let go, have pushed yourself too hard, or are becoming tense, anxious, and irritable.





3 Eucalyptus

Warming, drying, antiseptic, and antibiotic, eucalyptus has a refreshing effect on the nervous system. It is often used to relieve tiredness, poor concentration, and headache. It has traditionally been inhaled to fight respiratory tract infections such as colds, the flu, bronchitis, and pneumonia, and it doubles as a decongestant. Eucalyptus is also often used in the treatment of rheumatism and arthritis.

When To Use: If you recognize that it is time for change but feel blocked or trapped, eucalyptus can help you to achieve the clarity and spaciousness you need to act, dispelling confusion and allowing you to move forward. Tea tree oil is also excellent for the same purpose.

4 Orange Oil

Orange is very versatile and can be used for children and adults alike. It is uplifting yet relaxing, and is helpful in treating tension and tension-related headaches. It also helps to mobilize sluggishness and lethargy resulting from a slow digestive system. Orange is well known for its employment in treating the cold and flu.

When To Use: If you feel you are procrastinating, seeing obstacles in your way, becoming lazy, or finding it difficult to put effort into making changes, orange and other citrus fruits can help mobilize you. If overindulgence in bad habits also plagues your life, orange oil will help to shift you back into motion.



5 Jasmine

Known as the “king of perfumes” due to its importance to the fragrance industry, jasmine is delicate, rich, warm, and floral. It is the most uplifting of all the oils. It promotes a sense of relaxed awareness, working to boost self-confidence and as an anti-depressant. It relieves psychological tightness in the chest, and its soft fragrance has been indicated in sexuality and sensuality. It is also helpful for menstrual discomfort.

When To Use: Jasmine is helpful in alleviating sadness and grief, and softening the psychological effects of trauma. It is indicated in the clearing of old lingering feelings and the acceptance of all life’s experiences.



6 Lavender

With a long history in medicine and the fragrance industry, this Mediterranean aromatic shrub is the most versatile and well-used essential oil. It is balancing and regulating, restorative as well as reviving. Lavender relaxes cerebro-spinal activity and is used in the treatment of anxiety, depression, irritability, and nervous tension. It can also help in treating headaches and migraines due to its analgesic effects. In addition, lavender has a variety of uses for different skin conditions from eczema to acne, and is used to heal wounds and sores.

When To Use: If you are a sensitive person who is easily embarrassed, finds it difficult to express yourself in social situations, and conceals your vulnerability with a sense of efficiency and practicality, you may use lavender to release the more inhibited side of you and enable you to make the most out of each situation.





7 Peppermint

Peppermint oil is fresh, strong, and minty. It has been used in many commercial household and pharmaceutical products, including soaps, air fresheners, shaving creams, toothpastes, indigestion tablets, and drinks. It is cooling, refreshing, and stimulating, and it is helpful to the digestive system, particularly the stomach. It has been used to treat everything from indigestion and flatulence to regurgitating and hiccups and nausea and morning sickness. The second action of peppermint is on the respiratory system, where it acts as a decongestant much as eucalyptus does.

When To Use: Peppermint aids adaptation in transitional periods of life, such as changing jobs or moving house. You may know of the change but be uncertain of the direction to take; peppermint allows for a cleaner transition to a fresh start, the confidence to break away from the past, and the strength to move into the future.



8 Geranium

Native to South Africa, geranium is one of the most important perfumery oils. It is a powerful, sweet, green, cooling, and moistening oil, and is good where heat and dryness are present. It has an uplifting and strengthening effect, and yet it is balancing. Geranium cools and calms the nervous system and is useful for restlessness, heart palpitations, and panic attacks. It is popular in skincare creams and lotions, and its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties soothe conditions such as acne. It is also used to treat digestive problems such as constipation and diarrhea.

When To Use: If you feel stuck and are having difficulty letting go of past achievements, geranium helps improve self-confidence, allowing you to have more faith in your own decision making. It will soften out your defenses and irritability, enabling you to move forward more productively.



9 Rosemary

Regarded as a sacred herb for thousands of years, rosemary is a very tonifying, stimulating, and warming Mediterranean herb. Its effects on the circulatory system are well-documented; it stimulates a weak heart and is useful for treating low blood pressure and cold extremities. It increases circulation of blood to the brain and improves memory, concentration, and alertness. Rosemary is also useful for gastro-intestinal and digestive health, especially in nervous people. It is used in the treatment of colds and the flu, as well as the treatment of rheumatism and arthritis.

When To Use: If you are cold, nervous, or feeling weak and debilitated in some way, rosemary can help build strength. If past negative emotional experiences have prevented you from being able to fully and freely expressing yourself in close relationships, rosemary can help you better regain contact with your body and unblock your emotions. This will in turn enable you to relate better to others.

10 Sandalwood

Native to India, sandalwood is traditionally used in Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, mostly to quiet a restless body, calm a preoccupied mind, and soothe the nervous system. It is a renowned aphrodisiac, especially for men; in Chinese medicine, it is said to strengthen the yang, or male aspect. Sandalwood has been used for treating urinary tract infections, including cystitis, and is used to heal dry, itching, and inflamed skin.

When To Use: If you repeat the same patterns over and over again in your life, sandalwood may help break this never-ending cycle. It may be that you are approaching life in a rational and intellectual way without balancing it out with the more intuitive and feeling side. The scent of sandalwood enables you to find balance between the two sides and to come up with fresh new ideas, widening your vision.

There are so many things in life we do not take notice of or pay enough attention to; the way our senses affect us and how we can better use them to enhance our mental and emotional health is just one of them. Our sense of smell plays a huge role in how we feel. If we learn to utilize it to our advantage, it can bring about a more harmonious inner state and improve psychological wellbeing. So let's wake up and smell the roses! ■