6.3 Scents in your healing environment

Traditionally we might have used scents to help clear stale air and refreshen our healing environment before beginning healing (such as with smudging or using incense). Today, that situation has changed as we more fully understand the power and impact of scents on our emotions, memories and immune systems, any of which may also detract from the benefits we are trying to bring our clients by giving them spiritual healing.

Humans have long been fascinated by the power of scents. From ancient rituals in which fragrant herbs were burned to purify a space or to invoke healing, to modern aromatherapy practices integrated into clinical settings, scents have been both revered and methodically studied for their influence on our physiological and psychological state. Today we have the choice of using scented candles, reed or car diffusers, room and linen sprays, fragrant oils, humidifiers, essential oils or incense to enhance our environments. Amid growing evidence and consumer demand, the use of scent-based interventions is now being accepted within some healing environments including hospitals, mental health clinics, hospice care, and wellness centres. The introduction of scents in these spaces reflects not only cultural traditions but also emerging scientific evidence that associates olfactory stimulation with reduced stress, improved mood, enhanced relaxation, and even accelerated physical recovery.

Scents work through our olfactory system and have a direct effect on our emotions and memories. Our sense of smell is much stronger than our sense of taste. Research has revealed that the human nose is capable of distinguishing between approximately one trillion different smells, far surpassing the capabilities of our eyes and ears which can perceive about 10 million colours and distinguish roughly half a million tones, respectively.[1] Our sense of smell may have a much bigger impact upon our lives than we have previously acknowledged.

6.3.1 Historical context and traditional uses of scents

The use of aroma in healing can be traced back thousands of years. In ancient civilizations across Egypt, Greece, China, and India, scents were valued not only for their aesthetic properties but also for their purported medicinal benefits. Traditional practices saw incense and essential oils as tools for healing the body, mind, and spirit. For example, the ancient Egyptians used frankincense and myrrh in embalming and for ritual purification, while Ayurvedic medicine in India classified various herbal oils as vital for balancing the body's energies. These traditions laid the groundwork for what is now recognized as aromatherapy—a

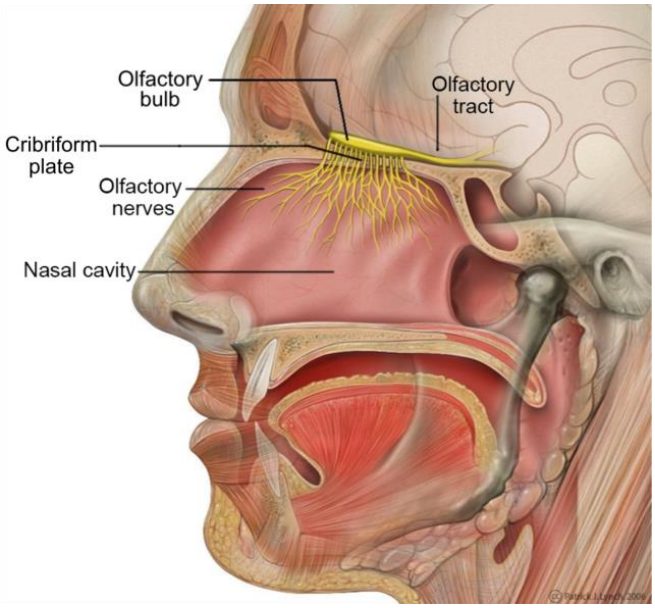
[1] C. Bushdid, M. O. Magnasco, L. B. Vosshall, & A. Keller, 2014, "Humans Can Discriminate More than 1 Trillion Olfactory Stimuli", Science 21 Mar 2014 Vol 343, Issue 6177, pp. 1370-1372, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1249168

systematic approach to using natural oils extracted from plants to improve physical and mental health.

These historical practices were based upon an intuitive understanding of the connection between the olfactory senses and emotional states. Modern research and investigations have begun to validate many traditional claims by documenting how smell can modulate mood, reduce anxiety, and even help with pain management.[2] Scents are not merely transient stimuli but are now recognised as powerful modulators of human behaviour and physiology.

6.3.2 The olfactory system and the brain

The sense of smell is directly linked to the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for emotions, memory, and arousal.[3] When odour molecules are inhaled, they bind to receptors in the nasal cavity. These receptors then send signals directly to the olfactory bulb. From the olfactory bulb, the processed signals are sent to various brain regions through the olfactory tract including the amygdala and hippocampus. These brain regions are responsible for regulating emotions, forming memories, and managing physiological responses like stress and arousal.



[4]

Unlike other senses, such as vision and hearing, the olfactory signals bypass the thalamus, which is the brain's central relay station for sensory information. Scent's direct pathway explains why certain smells can instantly evoke strong emotional responses or vivid memories.[5] And it also helps us to respond quickly when we smell something dangerous like smoke! (We aren't surrounded by too many smelly lions and tigers these days.) In a healing

[2] Ma. Levy Anne S. Amosin (2023) "Effects of Long-Term Exposure to Scents and Room Fragrance on Wellbeing: A Cross-Sectional Study", *Asian Journal of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities* Vol. 11, No. 1, 2023, https://multidisciplinaryjournals.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Full-paper-Effects-of-long-term-exposure-to-scents-and-room-fragrance-on-wellbeing-a-cross-sectional-study.pdf

[3] Herz, R. S. (2009). "Aromatherapy facts and fictions: A scientific analysis of olfactory effects on mood, physiology, and behavior." *International Journal of Neuroscience*, 119(2), 263-290.

[4] Diagram by Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator "File: Head Olfactory Nerve Labeled.png", Creative Commons, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Head_Olfactory_Nerve_Labeled.png

[5] Allison Marin (Curley), 2015, "Making Sense of Scents: Smell and the Brain" https://www.brainfacts.org/Thinking-Sensing-and-Behaving/Smell/2015/Making-Sense-of-Scents-Smell-and-the-Brain

environment, this connection can be leveraged to induce relaxation, reduce anxiety, and promote a sense of well-being.

Think about the smell of freshly cooked bread ...,
a freshly made pot or cup of coffee ...,
a newly mown lawn ...,
a fragrant rose ...
and traffic fumes.... Notice how quickly and easily each invokes an emotion or a memory from your past – and that's without even having the actual scent around – because it is already embedded in your brain. And our client's will react just as quickly when they encounter any scents we have in our healing environments.

Note that the olfactory tract does send some smell information to the thalamus which relays it on to be integrated with taste information. What we often attribute to the sense of taste is actually a combination of taste and smell information, and that explains why we seem to lose our sense of taste when we have a blocked nose[6].

6.3.3 How scent is used in medical healthcare settings

The healing environment plays a crucial role in patient recovery, influencing physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Among the various elements that contribute to a therapeutic setting, scent—often overlooked—has been shown to have profound effects on health outcomes. Aromatherapy, the controlled use of essential oils for therapeutic benefits, has gained recognition in clinical settings for its ability to reduce stress, alleviate pain, improve sleep, and enhance overall patient satisfaction.[7]

6.3.3.1. Psychological impact of scents

- **Reduction of anxiety and stress** Hospitalization and medical procedures often induce anxiety, which can impede recovery. Aromatherapy has been widely studied for its anxiolytic effects. A systematic review by Lakhan et al. found that inhalation of lavender oil significantly reduced preoperative and postoperative anxiety in surgical patients.[8]

[6] Ibid.
[7] Buckle, J. (2015). *Clinical Aromatherapy: Essential Oils in Healthcare*. Elsevier.
[8] Lakhan, S. E., et al. (2016). "The effectiveness of aromatherapy in reducing pain and anxiety: A systematic review." *Pain Research and Management*, 2016, 1-13.

Similarly, another study demonstrated that orange essential oil reduced anxiety in dental patients, highlighting its potential in high-stress clinical environments.[9]

- **Improvement in mood and depression** Depression is common among chronically ill and hospitalized patients. Citrus scents, such as bergamot and lemon, have been associated with mood enhancement due to their stimulating effects on serotonin and dopamine pathways.[10]
  Another study found that cancer patients exposed to bergamot aromatherapy reported significant improvements in emotional well-being.[11]
  Yet another found that scents like lavender, chamomile, and bergamot can be used to alleviate symptoms of emotional distress and improve overall mood. The article detailed how these scents, when inhaled, trigger immediate neural responses that lead to the activation of brain regions responsible for emotional regulation. It also outlined how aromatherapy has been successfully incorporated as an adjunct treatment in mental health settings, where it has been associated with reduced use of psychotropic medications and improved patient well-being. [12]
  Another study examining long-term exposure to both natural and synthetic room fragrances revealed that sustained olfactory stimulation significantly correlates with improved overall well-being.[13]

- **Enhanced sleep quality** Sleep disturbances are prevalent in healthcare settings due to environmental stressors. Lavender aromatherapy has been shown to improve sleep quality in ICU patients[14] and elderly individuals with insomnia[15]. The sedative properties of lavender may enhance slow-wave sleep, contributing to more restorative rest.

[9] Lehrner, J., et al. (2005). "Ambient odors of orange and lavender reduce anxiety and improve mood in a dental office." *Physiology & Behavior*, 86(1-2), 92-95.
[10] Komori, T., et al. (1995). "Effects of citrus fragrance on immune function and depressive states." *Neuroimmunomodulation*, 2(3), 174-180
[11] Peng, S. M., et al. (2009). "Effects of music and essential oil inhalation on cardiac autonomic balance in healthy individuals." *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 15(1), 53-57
[12] Butje, A., Repede, E., & Shattell, M. (2008). Healing scents: An overview of clinical aromatherapy for emotional distress. Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services, 46(10), 46-52.
[13] Ma. Levy Anne S. Amosin (2023) as above.
[14] Karadag, E., et al. (2017). "Effects of aromatherapy on sleep quality and anxiety of patients." *Nursing in Critical Care*, 22(2), 105-112
[15] Lewith, G. T., et al. (2005). "A single-blinded, randomized pilot study evaluating the aroma of Lavandula augustifolia as a treatment for mild insomnia." *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 11(4), 631-637.

6.3.3.2. Physiological impact of scents

Research has demonstrated that certain essential oils can influence the levels of neurotransmitters and hormones, and the autonomic nervous system activity, leading to measurable changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels.[16] For example:

- Exposure to pleasant essential oils is associated with increased production of serotonin and the release of endorphins. Endorphins have analgesic properties, contributing to pain relief and an increased sense of well-being.[17]
- Research in pain management contexts has shown that ambient scents can contribute to pain relief by modulating the perception of discomfort. For instance, certain studies suggest that the inhalation of peppermint essential oil may facilitate pain reduction in patients suffering from tension headaches or postoperative pain.[18]
- Peppermint (Mentha piperita) has also been found to enhance alertness, improve cognitive performance, and alleviate nausea.[19]
- Some studies have indicated that certain aromas can help modulate cortisol levels—the stress hormone—thereby reducing anxiety and improving sleep quality. One such scent is that of Lavender (Lavandula angustifolia) which has been shown to reduce cortisol levels, lower blood pressure, and promote relaxation.[20]
- Eucalyptus (Eucalyptus globulus) has anti-inflammatory and decongestant properties, making it useful in respiratory therapies.[21]

These physiological responses suggest that incorporating specific scents into healthcare settings can support conventional medical treatments.

6.3.3.3. How the use of scent is being applied in health care settings

- **Hospitals and critical care units** Hospitals are increasingly integrating aromatherapy into patient care protocols. For example:
  - Postoperative nausea and vomiting (PONV): Peppermint oil inhalation has been effective in reducing nausea in postoperative patients.[22]

[16] Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., et al. (2008). "Olfactory influences on mood and autonomic, endocrine, and immune function." *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 33(3), 328-339.
[17] Ma. Levy Anne S. Amosin (2023) as above.
[18] Spence C (2020) "Using Ambient Scent to Enhance Well-Being in the Multisensory Built Environment." *Frontiers in. Psychology* 11:598859. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.598859
[19] Kennedy, D. O., et al. (2011). "Monoterpenoid extract of sage (Salvia lavandulaefolia) with cholinesterase inhibiting properties improves cognitive performance and mood in healthy adults." *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 25(8), 1088-1100
[20] Hongratanaworakit, T. (2011). "Relaxing effect of rose oil on humans." *Natural Product Communications*, 6(2), 291-296.
[21] Sadlon, A. E., & Lamson, D. W. (2010). "Immune-modifying and antimicrobial effects of Eucalyptus oil and simple inhalation devices." *Alternative Medicine Review*, 15(1), 33-47.
[22] Tate, S. (1997). "Peppermint oil: A treatment for postoperative nausea." *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26(3), 543-549.

- Pain management: A blend of lavender, marjoram, and peppermint oils reduced pain perception in patients with chronic pain.[23]
- Infection control: Some essential oils, such as tea tree oil, exhibit antimicrobial properties, potentially reducing hospital-acquired infections.[24]

- **Palliative and hospice care** Aromatherapy is particularly valuable in palliative care, where symptom management and emotional support are priorities. Frankincense and chamomile have been used to alleviate anxiety and improve quality of life in terminal patients [25]
- **Mental health facilities** In psychiatric settings, calming scents like lavender and ylang-ylang have been used to reduce agitation in dementia patients and anxiety in individuals with PTSD (Lin et al., 2007).[26]
- **Rehabilitation centres and elderly care** Rehabilitation centres and facilities catering to the elderly population, especially nursing homes or centres for patients with dementia, use familiar scents to evoke pleasant memories or a sense of security and comfort. In elderly care settings, where changes in memory and cognitive function are common, the use of recognizable scents may help stabilize mood, reduce agitation, and promote a sense of continuity with the past.

6.3.4 Challenges and considerations

While the benefits of scent in healing environments are well-documented, challenges remain:

- **Individual variability:** Responses to scents can vary based on personal preferences and past experiences.[27] For instance, a scent that is calming for one person might evoke negative memories or even trigger allergic reactions in another.
- **Cultural and contextual variables:** Scents carry cultural and emotional connotations that vary from one society to another. While a particular essential oil might be highly regarded in one cultural context, it may have little to no positive effect—or could even be counterproductive—in another.

[23] Ou, M. C., et al. (2014). "Pain relief assessment by aromatic essential oil massage on outpatients with primary dysmenorrhea: A randomized, double-blind clinical trial." *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Research*, 40(3), 840-848.
[24] Carson, C. F., et al. (2006). "Melaleuca alternifolia (Tea Tree) oil: A review of antimicrobial and other medicinal properties." *Clinical Microbiology Reviews*, 19(1), 50-62.
[25] Bennett, M. P., et al. (2016). "The effects of frankincense on anxiety and depression in palliative care patients." *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 22(3), 203-209.
[26] Lin, P. W., et al. (2007). "Efficacy of aromatherapy in reducing agitation in dementia." *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 16(5), 837-844.
[27] Herz, R. S. (2009). "Aromatherapy facts and fictions: A scientific analysis of olfactory effects on mood, physiology, and behavior." *International Journal of Neuroscience*, 119(2), 263-290

- **Potential adverse effects:** Some individuals may experience allergic reactions or headaches from strong fragrances.[28]
- **Standardization issues:** The quality and concentration of essential oils can vary, affecting therapeutic outcomes.[29]

While the last challenge doesn't affect us as spiritual healers, the others can affect our clients if we are using scents in our environment.

6.3.5 Learning for spiritual healers

The evidence supporting the use of scents in healing environments is substantial and continuously growing. Integrating scents into clinical settings has produced measurable benefits, as evidenced by multiple case studies and clinical trials. Although challenges remain, including individual variability, the need for standardized protocols, and cultural differences.

It is the same for us as spiritual healers. While there are therapeutic benefits of using scents in our healing environments to complement our spiritual healing, there are also many sensitive people around that can have adverse reactions to them, either emotionally or as an allergic reaction. If you know your clients will react favourably to your proposed scents, then you are welcome to use them. If you are unsure, it may be better to avoid them.

If you need to clear the air in your environment, do so by opening the doors and windows and then using some other method to raise the vibration, such as using sound. If you do decide to still use scents, allow time for the smells to dissipate well before the client or clients arrive, or again open the doors and windows so the scents and stale air move out together.

[28] Schnaubelt, K. (2011) *Medical Aromatherapy: Healing with Essential Oils*. North Atlantic Books.
[29] Cooke, B., & Ernst, E. (2000). "Aromatherapy: A systematic review." *British Journal of General Practice*, 50(455), 493-496.

