

### 6.5.1 Candles

Candles have long been associated with relaxation, meditation, and healing environments. Their soft glow, combined with aromatic scents, can create a soothing atmosphere that promotes emotional and physical well-being. We have already looked at the use of scents in our healing environment (Section 6.3) so will not specifically address scented candles again in this section.

#### 6.5.1.1. *Historical context and traditional uses of candles*

Candles have long been associated with healing and spiritual practices. In ancient civilizations, such as Egypt, Greece, and Rome, candles were used in religious ceremonies to invoke divine healing<sup>1</sup>. The Catholic Church incorporated candles into prayer and anointing rituals, believing their light symbolized divine presence and purification<sup>2</sup> and other Christian churches did the same. In Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, candles are central to meditation and energy-clearing practices. In a Tibetan Buddhism context, they represented light as wisdom (symbolizing the illumination of ignorance), offerings to deities (e.g., lighting lamps to accumulate merit) and energy purification (fire rituals to clear negative karma)<sup>3</sup>. The Hindu practice of “aarti” involves flame offerings to deities<sup>4</sup> and the Hindu scripture references light as a metaphor for enlightenment<sup>5</sup>.

The therapeutic use of candles extends beyond religion. Traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda have utilized candlelight and aromatic wax to balance energy (chi, qi or prana) and promote relaxation<sup>6</sup>. This historical context underscores the deep-rooted belief in candles as tools for emotional and physical restoration.

Today candles, whether infused with essential oils, made from natural waxes, or simply lit for ambiance, provide a range of health benefits—both mental and physical. Their presence in healing environments, such as spas, hospitals, and meditation spaces, enhances relaxation, reduces stress, and improves overall well-being.

#### 6.5.1.2. *Psychological and emotional effects of candlelight*

- **Stress and anxiety reduction** One of the most well-known benefits of candles is their ability to promote relaxation. The soft, flickering light and warm glow create a

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<sup>1</sup> Dixon, L. (2012) *The Complete Book of Candles: A Historical Perspective*. HarperCollins

<sup>2</sup> McBrien, R. P. (2009). *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*. HarperOne

<sup>3</sup> Rinpoche, S. (2001) *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. HarperOne.

<sup>4</sup> Eck, D. L. (1998) *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>5</sup> The *Bhagavad Gita* (6.16–17) and the *Dhammapada* (Verse 387)

<sup>6</sup> Lad, V. (2002) *The Complete Book of Ayurveda: Principles and Practices for Daily Living*. Lotus Press

soothing ambiance that helps reduce stress and anxiety (and is probably better observed in the dark). Research in environmental psychology suggests that low, warm lighting (such as candlelight) can lower cortisol levels, the hormone associated with stress<sup>7</sup>. Another study found that dim lighting promotes relaxation by reducing sensory overload, allowing the brain to enter a more meditative state<sup>8</sup>.

Candlelight also encourages mindfulness, a practice linked to decreased anxiety. The act of focusing on a flame can serve as a grounding technique, helping individuals centre their thoughts and alleviate mental distress<sup>9</sup>.

- **Mood enhancement** The simple act of lighting a candle can have an impact on mood and emotional health. The ambiance created by candles can elevate mood by stimulating the production of serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters associated with happiness<sup>10</sup>. Another study found that participants exposed to candlelight in a relaxation setting reported improved mood and reduced depressive symptoms compared to those in brightly lit environments<sup>11</sup>.

### 6.5.1.3. *Physiological benefits of candles in healing*

- **Sleep improvement** Candles can contribute to better sleep quality by creating an atmosphere of tranquillity. A candlelit environment encourages the brain to release melatonin, the hormone responsible for sleep, whereas exposure to harsh artificial light before bedtime disrupts melatonin production<sup>12</sup>. Another study concurred that environments with warm-toned soft lighting (<10 lux), including candles, can improve sleep quality by promoting relaxation before bedtime<sup>13</sup>. The same study found that blue-rich light from screens/LEDs delays melatonin onset by 2-3 hours.

<sup>7</sup> Cheung, M. C., & Li, W. (2019) "The Effects of Ambient Lighting on Cortisol Levels." *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 63, 10-17.

<sup>8</sup> Knez, I. (2001) "Effects of Colour of Light on Nonvisual Psychological Processes" *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 21(2), 201-208.

<sup>9</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990) *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Delta.

<sup>10</sup> Field, T. (2010) "Light Therapy and Mood Enhancement" *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 16(1), pp.30-35.

<sup>11</sup> Goel, N., & Etwaroo, G. R. (2006) "Bright light, negative air ions, and candlelight as environmental interventions for seasonal and nonseasonal depression", *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 12(3), pp.144-153.

<sup>12</sup> Gooley, J. J., Chamberlain, K., Smith, K. A., Khalsa, S. B. S., Rajaratnam, S. M. W., Van Reen, E., Zeitzer, J. M., Czeisler, C. A., & Lockley, S. W. (2011) "Exposure to Room Light before Bedtime Suppresses Melatonin Onset and Shortens Melatonin Duration in Humans", *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 96(3), E463-E472.

<sup>13</sup> Figueiro, M. G., & Rea, M. S. (2010) "Lack of short-wavelength light during the school day delays dim light melatonin onset (DLMO) in middle school students", *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 14(5), pp.359-364.

- **Pain management** Candles, especially those used in aromatherapy, may aid in pain relief. Lavender-scented candles, for example, have been found to reduce perceived pain levels in clinical settings<sup>14</sup>. The combination of gentle light and soothing scents creates a distraction from discomfort, enhancing pain tolerance.



### 6.5.1.4. *Spiritual and meditative benefits*

Candlelight is often used in meditation and spiritual healing practices, and may assist with attunement. The flame serves as a focal point for concentration, aiding in deeper states of mindfulness<sup>15</sup>. In yoga and Reiki, candles can be used to cleanse energy fields and promote emotional release<sup>16</sup>. One study found that individuals who incorporated candle meditation into their routines reported higher levels of spiritual connectedness and inner peace<sup>17</sup>.

### 6.5.1.5. *Practical applications in healing environments*

Many of the practical uses of candles in healthcare and wellness centres involve scented candles which combine the effects of scents with those of a burning candle. Generally, open flames are not permitted in hospitals and LED candles do not have the same effect. Candles still play a significant role in meditation and yoga practices. Their gentle glow helps create a serene environment, allowing individuals to focus on mindfulness and relaxation. The use of scented candles enhances the experience by promoting deeper breathing and emotional balance. Spas and wellness centres often incorporate candles into their ambiance to enhance relaxation and create a luxurious experience. The combination of soft lighting and soothing scents contributes to stress relief and overall well-being.

<sup>14</sup> Koulivand, P. H., et al. (2013) "Lavender and the Nervous System." *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*.

<sup>15</sup> Goleman, D. (1988) *The Meditative Mind: The Varieties of Meditative Experience*, TarcherPerigee (originally Jeremy P. Tarcher).

<sup>16</sup> Miles, P. (2008) *Reiki: A Comprehensive Guide*, TarcherPerigee (Penguin Random House).

<sup>17</sup> Wachholtz, A. B., & Pargament, K. I. (2005). "Is Spirituality a Critical Ingredient of Meditation?" *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(3), 204-225.

### 6.5.1.6. Challenges and considerations

While candles offer numerous benefits, certain risks must be addressed:

- Air quality:** Paraffin wax candles may release harmful chemicals when burned<sup>18</sup>. Opting for soy or beeswax candles reduces this risk. Ensuring proper ventilation when burning candles can also help reduce exposure to harmful pollutants. A study from the University of Birmingham and the University of Manchester found that short-term exposure to air pollution from burning candles (such as birthday cake candles) can impair cognitive functions, including selective attention and emotion recognition. The study suggests that PM2.5 particulate matter impacts the brain either directly through the bloodstream or indirectly by causing inflammation in the respiratory system<sup>19</sup>. Conversely, it is claimed that natural candles made from beeswax or soy can even act as air purifiers. When burned, beeswax candles release negative ions that bind with toxins, effectively removing them from the air. Additionally, essential oils like tea tree and eucalyptus have antimicrobial properties, further enhancing indoor air quality.<sup>20</sup>
- Fire hazards:** Proper candle safety is essential in healing environments. Ensure flammable material is kept away from the flame. Ensure the candle is insulated below or make sure it doesn't burn so low that whatever it is sitting upon melts, shatters or catches fire. Some environments do not allow open flames, especially if they have sensitive water sprinklers or high insurance costs, so make sure you know what is acceptable in your environment.
- Allergies:** If using candles with a scent, individuals' reactions to scents can vary greatly and some individuals may be sensitive to strong fragrances.



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<sup>18</sup> Oeder, S., Dietrich, S., Weichenmeier, I., Schober, W., Pusch, G., Jörres, R. A., ... & Nowak, D. (2015) "Toxicity and elemental composition of particulate matter from outdoor and indoor air pollution in school environments", *Environmental Research*, 138, pp.405-412.

<sup>19</sup> The Times, 7/2/2025 "Air pollution from candles impairs brain function, study suggests", *The Times*.

<sup>20</sup> AromaLeap (2024) "The top 10 Health and Wellness Benefits of Scented Candles" extracted 25/5/25 from <https://aromaleap.com/blog/scented-candles-benefits/>.

<sup>21</sup> Picture created with Microsoft Copilot.



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### **6.5.1.7. *Learning for spiritual healers***

It has long been accepted that candles play a significant role in healing environments by reducing stress, enhancing mood, improving sleep, and facilitating spiritual practices. Their combination of soft light and therapeutic aromas can make them useful tools in holistic wellness and spiritual development.

While candles can improve clients' and healers' well-being in our healing environments, it is essential to choose natural, non-toxic options to avoid potential respiratory concerns, and to also treat them with the respect that open flames demand. They are a relatively cheap option to enhance the ambiance and give client's something calming to focus upon while waiting for healing. If allowed and used in your healing environment, candles can contribute to a peaceful and restorative atmosphere.