



AROMA THERAPY

Is scent the latest defence against poor mental health? INGBORG VAN LOTRINGEN thinks so

My home town smells of oxygen. On the edge of a forest, there's a scent of damp earth, tree sap and leaves that rises up, especially when I pad through the quiet streets on summer nights. It always gives me a lump in my throat because I get such an acute sense both of time passing and of the peace and security I was lucky to grow up with. To this day, the perfumes I wear are full of notes prized for making us feel safe, secure and "at home"; I never seek them out, but I seem to gravitate towards them.

There are plenty of reasons to choose a scent, but we often forget the most important one: perfume can make you feel better, and not just in a "Nice smell!" kind of way. Fragrances can help you mitigate shitty feelings like anger, grief or even depression without forcing you to suppress or deny them. They can affect surface emotions, making you feel more powerful or peaceful, by tapping into something much more innate. Consider that babies recognise their

mums by scent and men's testosterone levels rise when they smell an ovulating woman's T-shirt. Chemicals in our sweat, meanwhile, can signal fear, lust or disgust. It all gives an indication of how much our sense of smell still guides and affects us, just as it did our animal predecessors. Today, in an always-on, sensory-overload world, where feeling overwhelmed is a daily reality, this most primary

of our senses may be the best thing to help us cut through the noise and bring us back to ourselves.

"Scents make us feel things for no reason"

The science of scents

You might have heard the science bit about why scent can have such a visceral and instant effect on us: the centres for processing smell, emotion, memories and instinct are all part of the same speed-linked network in the brain. It explains why scents make you feel things for no apparent reason, and why they can whizz you back to your childhood or a Faliraki nightclub in a mere whiff.

Less has been said, from a scientific perspective at >

least, about a more hardwired way in which fragrance can affect our mental and even physical health – until now. A growing body of evidence shows that evolution has taught our brains to recognise the aromas of plants that could have health benefits. Our response to them is not only psychological (the scents will calm or comfort us) but also physical: smelling specific protective wood essential oils, for example, can lower blood pressure and stress-hormone levels, and may even increase immune-cell activity. It's part of the reason “forest bathing” (OK, walking in the woods) has become a thing. It also partly explains the calm

“Aromas can alter people’s brain-wave patterns”

I feel when I return to my leafy home – something I’d previously put down to mere nostalgia.

“Aromatherapy has long recognised these principles, but rigorous scientific proof has been scarce,” says psychologist Dr Mark Moss of Northumbria University. “With pharmaceutical science in somewhat of a cul-de-sac when it comes to managing our wellbeing and mental health, we’re now re-examining “old wives’ tales” and finding plenty of scientifically sound reasons to use scent therapeutically.”

Brain-imaging technology proves, Moss says, that certain aromas change people’s brain-wave patterns, irrespective of their familiarity with the smell. It suggests a mood-modulating effect that quite surpasses our associations with scent. He also notes there are more direct connections to a wide range of brain functions in the nose than in any other sensory organ, so it makes sense that scents can change our moods and even our behaviour.

A recent study* has even demonstrated how a poor sense of smell in older adults is linked to the onset of depression, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease.

Evidently, scent is powerful: we just have to stop underestimating it.

Perfumes with a purpose

Thankfully, the perfume world has cottoned on to the power that lies beneath: “functional fragrances” that cater to our evolving olfactory needs are everywhere. Perfumers, unsurprisingly, are inspired by the possibility of creating “supercharged” scents that go beyond just smelling beautiful, while modern consumers, says

trend forecaster and Wewearperfume.com editor Amanda Carr, “are increasingly interested in perfume ingredients, their provenance and their benefits”. The question is, how can we find the scent (or scents) we need most? Carr advises you to move away from pungent beauty halls (“You want to keep your ‘smell space’ neutral so your brain gets a clear message”) and try small brands that “tend to use higher concentrations of fragrance oils and non-commercial ingredients”. She loves a fragrance workshop to develop your sense of smell: “At The Perfume Society [workshop], I learned women are more perceptive to smell around ovulation. Also, you can “train” your nose by sniffing two or three things every morning and writing down what you perceive. You’ll be amazed how quickly you start noticing smells all around you.” Asking others about their personal stories of scent is another way to find inspiration: “Hearing about the feelings involved is an excellent way of pointing you towards something that could be right for you.” So next time you feel low or listless, forget your 4pm sugar hit – build a store cupboard of scent that’s every bit as powerful.



YOUR SCENTED MEDICINE CABINET

A small guide to navigating the world of smell, by mood

When you’re anxious

Neal’s Yard Remedies To Roll Women’s Balance, £8 (9ml) Geranium mitigates mood swings and anxiety, and patchouli, as any hippy knows, is relaxing. So that’s why one *Cosmo* editor gets stopped by women demanding “WHAT’S THAT SMELL? I NEED IT” each time she wears this.



When you’re exhausted

Rahua Palo Santo Oil Perfume, £32 (10ml); Ruth Mastenbroek Dagian EDP, £90 (50ml)† When you’re on your last legs, you need notes that can energise and soothe at the same time, like mint and citrus. Dagian is heavy with sweet, ripe lemon, lime and mint, with all the soul-restoring power of the Mediterranean holiday its creation was inspired by; the oil of citrusy, piney, minty Palo Santo wood (the Incans tapped into its spiritual and medicinal properties) has much the same effect.



When you’re overwhelmed

AllSaints Metal Wave EDP, £49 (100ml) “People today crave quiet,” says energy healer Sushma Sagar of Thecalmery.com. “A silent mind can be the start of a healing process, and scent can help to clear energy.” No wonder airy, evanescent scents with juniper, white musk and chamomile are so popular right now.



When you’re stressed out

Chanel Les Exclusifs Sycomore EDP, £155 (75ml); Tisserand Patchouli Organic Pure Essential Oil, £9.50 (9ml) Chic, serene Sycomore is one of my favourite scents, but for some reason my husband uses it (rather extravagantly, I might add) as a sleep mist. I say “for some reason”, but he seems to have cottoned on to the stress-relieving properties of its mossy, smoky vetiver and frankincense notes that have been employed for centuries to give balance, peace and strength.



When you’re heartbroken

Kalmar Balm Of Serenity, £18; Aromatherapy Associates Forest Therapy Bath & Shower Oil, £49 Daily runs in the forest got me through losing my beloved dad with more calm than I ever thought possible. The exercise helped, but so did the anti-depressant, volatile oils from the bark, resins and leaves (look for pine, cypress and amber notes) all around me. ♦



When you’re angry

Lalique Soleil EDP, £48 (30ml); Penhaligon’s Heartless Helen EDP, £188 (75ml) It’s actually proven that people are kinder to each other in coffee shops and bakeries: pleasant, comforting scents do that to us. Foodie notes like vanilla, coffee and cinnamon, or creamy florals that emulate suntan lotion, can instantly turn your frown upside down.



When you need confidence

DoTerra Anchor Steadying Blend, £27.33 (5ml); Dolce & Gabbana K EDT, £55 (50ml) Calming yet mind-focusing lavender and steady woods will help you tap into your inner strength and courage. In perfume, crisp, aromatic, herbaceous scents in the “fougère” (meaning fern) category will combine these notes to make you feel like a woman who means business. (You’ll find these mostly marketed at men, sigh.)



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