

NATURAL RESOURCES



How essential oils can help you muddle through this holiday's harshest maladies.

By Amy Zavatto

We'd all like peace on earth; but this holiday season, you'd probably settle for a little peace of mind. Stress, sleeplessness, financial and social anxiety, and even depression grip many of us during these seemingly happy but helter-skelter months. The real gift you need is relief.

Enter essential oils, concentrated, pure extractions from plants that many practitioners of both eastern and western medicine believe have the power to ease what ails you—or, at the very least, to tamp the urge to rip December right out of the calendar.

Smell Yourself Well

The blues and its colorful compatriots are a growing source of code red, with 40 million adults suffering from some form of anxiety disorder in the U.S. alone, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

While essential oils and aromatherapy are certainly not a cure, they are an excellent ingredient in a holistic prescription for better mental health.

“Natural essential oils combat conditions like depression, stress, exhaustion, and sleeplessness,” says Claudia Maghidman, medical aesthetician and owner of the Health & Skin Center of Miami.

How do they work? **Dr. Gabrielle Francis**, a naturopathic doctor, chiropractor, acupuncturist with her company the **Herban Alchemist**, and author of **The Rockstar Remedy** (Harper Collins), says essential oils are, in effect, a plant's immune system. “The component that gives them their strong aroma protects from bacteria, viruses, and other microbes,” she says. “They will do the same for you.”

“I frequently recommend essential oils to my patients,” says Sheenie Ambardar, M.D., a Beverly Hills, California, psychiatrist and psychotherapist, “usually as an adjunct to other treatment modalities.”

Ambardar is not the only western medical professional in this camp. “The ‘smell’ receptors in your nose communicate with parts of your brain [the amygdala and hippocampus] that are storehouses for emotions and memories,” says Laurie Tomsa, R.N., an outpatient care manager and certified aromatherapist at Cancer Treatment Centers of America at Midwestern Regional Medical Center in Zion, Illinois. “When you breathe in essential oil molecules, some researchers believe they stimulate these brain centers and influence physical, emotional, and mental health.”

Salve or Snake Oil?

A true essential oil is an extremely concentrated liquid. “It takes 16 pounds of peppermint leaves to yield 1 ounce of essential oil,” says Celeste Hilling, founder and CEO of Skin Authority in Carlsbad, California. “They are very different than common carrier oils or fragrance oils found in most beauty products,” which are often synthetic, she warns. And to be effective, many essential oils must be diluted with a carrier oil like jojoba, sweet almond, coconut, or olive before applying. So which oils will work for problems that plague your psyche?

Depression Clary sage oil is a great spirit-lifting scent that also promotes relaxation and eases tension, offers Karen Page, an herbal expert with Penn Herb in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Farah Abassi, founder of Aroma360, suggests orange essential oil. “It is high in cineol,” she says, which “can stimulate blood flow to the emotional centers of our brains, help fight depression, and reduce stress.”

Stress and Anxiety When the holiday crowds and bottleneck traffic start to wear on your nerves, Page recommends a spicy, stress-relieving scent like coriander oil to melt away stress and tension. She also suggests California lemon oil to lift spirits, increase alertness, and enhance your general sense of well-being.

Sleeplessness Lavender oil is excellent for mood disorders and chronic insomnia. “Studies suggest that it calms the nervous system by reducing serum cortisol levels and promotes the relaxation response,” says Dr. Ambardar. Try combing it with sandalwood, says Abassi. “Put a few drops on a cotton ball and place it in your pillow case to take you into an even more restful sleep.”

Anger To keep cool, Page likes the rich, earthy-musty scent of vetiver essential oil. “[It] soothes away tension and irritability,” she says.

Abassi swears by cinnamon to reduce blood pressure—and rekindle your holiday spirit. “Fill an empty spray bottle with 1 cup of distilled water, 6 drops of cinnamon essential oil, and 3 drops of clove oil. Shake well and let it sit for a few hours,” then spray, she says.

Exhaustion For pep in your step, **Dr. Francis** likes basil oil to stimulate adrenal glands and ease mental fatigue.