

Aromatherapy: An Age Old Stress-Buster

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Even cave women had stress. We actually inherited it from them in some ways. It stems from the “fight or flight” response. When early woman was in a dangerous situation, “fight or flight” would kick in and help her determine her response. Now, we experience the same “fight or flight” feelings when we feel we're in situations out of our control. Our response to the situation isn't always able to “fix” the problem and we find ourselves “stressed out” over it. One of the main reasons I found myself drawn to learning about aromatherapy is to deal with the stress I feel affecting my good health. I am dealing with auto-immune issues which are definitely exacerbated by unresolved stress. Aside from the fact that I have a personality prone to worry about things, I work full-time in the special education field and am a mother and wife. As I delve further and further into the world of aromatherapy, I feel empowered to handle my stress in a proactive way. I am healthier than I have been in years.

Kathy Keville and Mindy Green describe the connection our nervous system makes between our body and brain in their book, *Aromatherapy: A Complete Guide to the Healing Art*. Because of this body-brain connection, mental or emotional stress can cause physical problems in the body. In his book, *Natural Prescriptions*, Dr. Robert Giller states, “I believe that stress is one of our most serious health problems because it affects every aspect of how the body works.” He explains that stress can make other illnesses worse. He describes how our bodies strive for a sense of balance through a process called “homeostasis”. We encounter stress on a daily basis through routine

chores, unexpected surprises, or other physical or emotional dealings. Our body goes through a string of physical responses including, heightened nervous system sensitivity, quickened heart rate, sharpened reflexes, muscle tension, pupil dilation, contraction of blood vessels in the skin. A host of chemicals are released, as well. The liver releases glucose, digestive activity slows, and ability of blood to coagulate increases. All of this is in response for conserving energy if a “fight” ensues or if we need to make a quick get-away. This response is important if faced with a life-threatening problem, when we need extra strength and fast reflexes. Today, this response is triggered when a situation is far from life-threatening. Traffic, co-workers, bills, etc. can set us up for stress that is not so quickly resolved. It is this constant stress that is detrimental to our health. One of the most dangerous, long-term effects of constant stress can be high blood pressure.

Dr. Giller goes on to explain that striving for a stress-free life is an unreasonable goal. Some stress is actually helpful. It helps us reach goals, etc. He challenges us to deal sensibly with stress and take actions to defuse it. He offers directions for a relaxation response which is a form of meditation. I can only imagine how well it would work if combined with aromatherapy!

In the book, *New Choices in Natural Healing*, edited by Bill Gottlieb, stress is described as an “inescapable reality of modern life.” He links it to many disorders ranging from allergies to asthma, from stomach problems to heart disease. He relays the fact that some doctors estimate that at least 80 percent of their patients suffer from some side effects of stress. The first idea given for relieving some of this stress is

aromatherapy. The example was given of using some essential oil in your car on your commute home in place of the after-work martini. Other ideas given included; flower remedies, herbal therapy, imagery, massage, reflexology, relaxation/meditation, sound therapy, vitamin and mineral therapy, and yoga. I feel most of those methods would be further enhanced by combining them with aromatherapy. After all, it was Hippocrates that said, "The way to health, is to have an aromatic bath and a scented massage every day." In the Reference Guide for Essential Oils, compiled by Connie and Alan Higley, they give the following sound advice, "You can't change the stressful situations that come, but you can change your response to those situations."

There are many different essential oils that can help combat stress. First, we need to understand what is causing our stress. In the book, *New Choices in Natural Healing for Women*, medical advisor, Adriane Fugh-Berman, M.D., describes aromatherapy as "healing with nature's scents." She reported the following oils as top stress-busters:

Basil: nature's nerve tonic

Clary sage: the mood elevator

Geranium: the hormonal balancer

Lavender: the insomniac's friend

Roman chamomile: for bad dreams or bad moods

Sweet orange: an emotional pick-me-up

I find a main source of most of my stress to be the workplace. With 60-70 employees and 500 students in the same building, conflicts are a common occurrence.

According to the website: [www.aromatherapy-stress-relief.com](http://www.aromatherapy-stress-relief.com) , as early as 1992, The World Health Organization called stress a “worldwide epidemic”. While it is a website that originates in the UK (a country highly known for its acceptance of aromatherapy) and obviously has products it is trying to sell, they had some interesting facts. They quote a study that found, “Keyboard errors have been shown to fall by over 50% when the fragrance of lemon is diffused into the office atmosphere.” They describe how dealing with stress in the work situation can be somewhat difficult. A workplace is not always conducive to meditation or yoga. Aromatherapy can be a very nice option and if handled appropriately, probably not objectionable to other staff. They actually sell a small diffuser that can be attached to your computer and is rather discreet. That is a product I had not yet seen, although I prefer the ultrasonic diffuser or spritzers myself.

In conclusion, stress can be a hazard to our health if not dealt with in an appropriate manner. Many of my sources gave numerous ideas for dealing with stress ranging from aromatherapy to meditation to yoga. I found it interesting to realize that aromatherapy could be combined with most of their ideas, as well as, used by itself. Getting a handle on stress could well be the first and biggest step a person can take to regaining, maintaining, and even improving their health in the future.

Giller, M.D., Robert. *Natural Prescriptions*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1994. Print.

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"Stress: A "Worldwide Epidemic"." *Aroma Stress Buster*. 2008. CUS Busting Ltd., Oxfordshire, UK, Web. 31 Oct 2009. <<http://www.aromatherapy-stress-relief.com>>.