

The Do's and Don'ts of Aromatherapy in Massage

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Introduction

Many people believe that aromatherapy and massage go together like cookies and milk. Generally, this is an accurate assumption. Since aromatherapy involves the absorption of plant essences through inhalation, ingestion, and/or absorption through the skin, massage is an excellent method of delivery. However, few massage practitioners realize the significant and varied effects that essential oils can have from one client to the next. Aromatherapy is considered by many to be simply the use of perfumed oils to enhance the overall massage experience, but essential oils do much more than simply “smell good”. They affect individuals on physical, emotional and spiritual levels. Moreover, these effects can be either positive or negative depending on the individual. Therefore, for the benefit of the client as well as the practitioner, it is important to follow certain guidelines when administering aromatherapy during massage. The following is an outline of some important “do’s and don’ts” to keep in mind.

The Do's

Do: Research

As with any massage modality, proper training in aromatherapy is key to its successful application. Simply using certain oils because they smell nice is just the beginning. It is very important to know ahead of time what effects these oils could have on both you and your client. An educated, thoughtful use of aromatherapy will leave clients feeling happy and healthy, rather than upset and nauseated.

Do: Use Pure Oils

Always use therapeutic-grade pure essential oils. Otherwise, you will be exposing your clients and yourself to potentially harmful chemical additives that are found in lower-grade fragrance oils. Pure essential oils are expensive, but they last a long time and a little goes a long way.

Do: Test Essential Oils on Yourself

Once you have familiarized yourself with the effects, proper application, and precautions for aromatherapy, it is a great idea to experiment on yourself (and possibly on any amenable friends or family members). That way, you have first-hand knowledge of the effects of certain essential oils which you can then accurately describe to your clients. Additionally you will discover which ones affect you adversely so you can avoid using them in your practice.

Begin by using single-note oils. Apply one oil (using an appropriate carrier oil) daily for one week and record any noticed effects in a journal. Also record which essential oil and carrier oil was used, what time of day it was applied, and where on the body it was applied. Because some oils (known as “base notes”) can stay in your body for up to 72 hours, it is a good idea to wait at least one week between “experiments” so that any oils used in the previous test will have been fully metabolized.

After you have completed your single-note tests, you may want to try combining oils to see what effects you notice. Again, keep careful records of your tests for later reference.

Do: Take a Health History

Before administering aromatherapy treatments, be sure to get a health history from your client, just as you would for any other massage treatment. Refer to aromatherapy resource materials for information on contraindications related to various medical conditions. More specifically, get information about any skin sensitivities or allergies that the client has. For example, if the client is allergic to nuts, it would affect your choice of carrier oils: hazelnut, almond and peanut oils would be contraindicated. Also, be very careful with pregnant clients; check your reference materials to determine which oils are safe to use.

Do: Mix Therapeutic Blends in Advance

If you know ahead of time that your client is looking for certain therapeutic benefits from aromatherapy, it is a good idea to get an intake sheet before the appointment, formulate a blend, and have the client do a skin patch test before the actual massage session. That way, both you and the client will know ahead of time whether skin sensitivity or allergies will be an issue.

Do: Have All-purpose Blends on Hand

Many of your clients will not be looking for specific therapeutic benefits from aromatherapy; they just want something that smells good and enhances the overall enjoyment of the massage. So, keep a couple of safe general purpose blends on hand: ideally, one that is stimulating and one that is relaxing. Some good choices for these blends might be cypress, fir, myrtle, and tea tree. Also, lavender is a very popular and versatile oil which can generally be safely used except with clients with low blood pressure and with women in their first trimester of pregnancy.

Do: use Fragrance-free Linens

It is a good general rule-of-thumb to launder linens with fragrance-free laundry soap. This is true whether or not you administer aromatherapy during your massage sessions. If you have clients who are sensitive to odors, they will appreciate the odorless linens. And, for your aromatherapy clients, fragrance-free linens will not distract from the aromatherapy session as scented sheets would. For your personal laundry, it’s fun to add essential oils to unscented laundry soap; you’ll get nice-smelling clothes without the harmful chemicals that are often associated with artificial scents.

Do: Ventilate Between Sessions

Have you ever walked into a heavily scented room and immediately felt queasy, short of breath, or dizzy? That is what can happen to a client if your session room still has the lingering odor of the previous client's aromatherapy treatment. Since individuals have varied reactions to essential oils, it is important to clear the air of your session room as thoroughly as possible between sessions. This can be rather difficult depending on your environment. An air purifier is a great piece of equipment to have in the room. Also, opening a window and running a fan between sessions is very helpful. In addition, keep used linens outside the session room if possible, since they absorb a lot of the aroma of essential oils during a session.

The Don'ts

Don't: Do Too Many Sessions Per Day

What is a typical day like for a full-time massage therapist? Let's suppose that an average number of sessions per day falls between 3 – 5. If you use aromatherapy for each session, at an average of three oils per blend, you may potentially be absorbing up to 15 different oils in a single day! That kind of "sensory overload" could cause serious adverse effects in you as a practitioner. To protect yourself, try to limit the number of aromatherapy sessions you do per day, as well as per week. Essential oils can stay in your system anywhere from 2 – 72 hours, so it's important to be aware of the potential risks you are exposing yourself to and act accordingly.

One way to limit excess exposure is to apply the essential oils to your client as a spot treatment while wearing gloves, and then perform the rest of the massage with unscented lotion. Another way is to place a drop of essential oil blend on a cotton pad and place it under the face cradle. That way, the client gets the benefit of inhalation of the essential oil while you limit your exposure.

Don't: Use Oils That You are Sensitive To

When offering aromatherapy treatments to your clients, limit their choices to only the essential oils that you can tolerate. There are plenty of essential oils to choose from, so there is no reason to expose yourself to potential harm by using essential oils that cause adverse reactions to you.

Don't: Use Too Much/Overdo It

Many practitioners who are new to aromatherapy will make the mistake of thinking that "more is better." Remember, a little essential oil goes a long way. Too much can make you and your client ill. Also, there is no need for overkill; if you place essential oils in a diffuser, add them to massage cream, and place them under the face cradle all in the same session, that is too much exposure for you and your client.

Don't: Apply to the Face

Unless you are a licensed esthetician, it is best not to apply essential oil blends to the face. Facial skin is much more sensitive than the skin on other parts of the body; it is possible to see adverse reactions on the face that might not otherwise appear on the rest of the body.

Don't: Apply Neat

Never apply essential oils to the skin unless they have been diluted with carrier oil. Undiluted essential oils, also known as “neat”, can irritate the skin. A notable exception to this is lavender, which can be applied to the skin undiluted.

Don't: Guarantee Results

Aromatherapy has amazing therapeutic benefits; however, it is a combination of art and science and does not act consistently from one individual to the next. Therefore, it is important to explain fully to your client what the possible benefits and side effects of his/her aromatherapy session may be, and to make sure that the client understands that there is no guarantee of a specific result.

Conclusion

There are so many variables to consider in the practice of aromatherapy. The guidelines outlined here are just a few. Aromatherapy can be a therapeutic and immensely enjoyable experience for both the client and the massage therapist as long as it is practiced mindfully, with good intent, and with proper education and application. With this in mind, the possibilities for enrichment of people's lives through aromatherapy are limited only by one's imagination.

Sources

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