

Using Essential Oils to Reduce Panic Attacks by Michel Watson

Panic attacks can be very debilitating, disruptive, and sometimes embarrassing. They can come on with little or no warning. Many will tell you that to help alleviate or stop an attack would be by utilizing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or visualization, which do help. But for those who have experienced these attacks will tell you (including myself), that this can be quite a feat when in the throes of the nervous system going awry, even with practice. So, having an outside stimulus with therapeutic properties outside the conventional Western medications, essential oils can prove very useful in aiding in halting a panic attack by the virtue of the way these oils operate with the autonomic nervous system.

In order combat panic, I find a very direct method is necessary. This would be by utilizing the sense of smell since it is the only sense that works directly with the limbic system, which directly influences the autonomic nervous system.¹ This is an important factor with panic attacks since at the time of panic the autonomic nervous system is directly affected and this is the system that is in need of balancing. Panic attacks are an improper response eliciting a fight or flight response when no threat is present.² This then sends a cascading effect through the sympathetic nervous system. When this happens a person may begin to hyperventilate, the pulse quickens, the digestive system slows, sweating may increase, and so forth.³ Again, essential oils are key tools to create this balance since their molecules are capable of entering this system directly and without harm provided the correct oils are being used for the individual.

For those who have panic attacks with little or no warning the best vehicle for administering the oils would be direct inhalation via an inhaler or a few drops on a tissue or cotton ball. This is a very quick means to achieving calm and halting/reversing the nervous system back to a state of homeostasis. This doesn't negate the use of utilizing diffusers or massage oils that can help prevent, but this is the most effective method I have found once the panic attack has begun. Another method that I have found useful is placing a few drops of a blend in the crease of the arm by the elbow, this location helps the oils enter the blood stream quickly. It is important to note that there are instances when the individual may perceive that they are having a panic attack, but the cause could be something physiological. So the individual should seek some form of medical attention first to determine the exact cause. Essential oils

are powerful tools and like other therapeutic substances, there is always the concern of making sure they are appropriate to the individual.

Oils to be used should be chosen very carefully. Many of the references on the internet refer to utilizing oils such as Lavender and Rose. The concern here is that many times on these sites the safety precautions of these oils are not directly noted and for those looking for a solution or “quick fix” may possibly use these oils without the knowledge of how they may impact an individual’s health. In the case of Lavender, very popular oil, individuals with low blood pressure may create more problems than they started with by using this oil. I have found too, that these oils can be found in many New Age shops where the clerks are unable to provide further information other than the basics and that they smell nice or have metaphysical properties. This isn’t to say that these are ineffective oils, because they are effective, however they should be chosen wisely and thoughtfully by or for individuals.

When choosing oils for panic attacks, I have found that it is more effective to not only use the traditional ones that calm and are geared towards anxiety, but also to include oils that help in grounding the Root chakra as well. There are many references published throughout books as well as articles with a varying opinion of which oils that can be used for this Chakra. The following are ones that I have perceived to be useful both from the Chakra stand point as well as their therapeutic properties as essential oils; Frankincense, Cedarwood, Benzoin, and Vetiver. All of which have the calming properties.

Frankincense in particular, has been described by Patricia Davis as “among its physical properties, the ability to slow down and deepen breathing.”⁴ This is very important especially to one that is having a panic attack because a common result of panic is a change in breathing, to short and shallow breaths that can lead to hyperventilation which in turn leads to further panic and increased symptoms. Frankincense is also referenced by Valerie Ann Worwood in her book “The Fragrant Mind” as an essential oil in her “Panic Attack Calming Blend.”⁵

Cedarwood (this includes the Atlas, Texas, and Virginian) has the property of being a sedative and is used for nervous tension and stress.⁶ It has been said to “strengthen the connection with the divine”⁷ and the ability to “release anxiety or fear.”⁸

Benzoin too is useful for nervous tension and stress.⁹ It has been described as having the ability to “create a kind of euphoria”¹⁰ which is beneficial in halting a panic attack.

Vetiver has been known as the “oil of tranquility.”¹¹ It relieves nervous tension and is described by Patricia Davis and Clare Walters, as “deeply relaxing”¹² and “useful for those who need to ground and center their energies.”¹³

These oils are described by many as those to balance and ground the Root Chakra, and also have the properties that would be useful to helping halt a panic attack. I believe that by having both a spiritual as well as a physically practical use, it helps these oils become more powerful in their effect of balancing both the mind and body of a person having a panic attack. Note that I do not necessary believe that all panic stems from being ungrounded at the Root Chakra, though the result can be the same. It is my intuition that an imbalance in any of the other six Chakras can also become contributing factors to a person who may have a tendency towards panic, and by grounding the Root Chakra at the time of panic it will aid the individual. By virtue of the properties of these oils alone, they can provide relief.

When mixing oils for panic attacks for myself or an individual, I choose to combine one of the grounding oils for the Root Chakra with some of the more “traditional” calming oils that also having properties are useful in combating some of the symptoms of a panic attack. These could include Rose, Ylang ylang, Neroli, Lavender, Roman Chamomile, and Sweet Marjoram to create a physical and ethereal balance to combating panic attacks.

Rose oil is known to be a mild sedative.¹⁴ In addition to this, it can help with physical symptoms that a panic attack can bring on such as palpitations, nausea, and aid in balancing the digestive system.¹⁵

Ylang ylang regulates adrenaline, relaxes the central nervous system, and lowers blood pressure.¹⁶ The adrenaline regulation is important since with a panic attack, adrenaline is released creating the fight or flight response. It is known as a sedative and aiding with nervous tension.¹⁷ Physically it can help with fast breathing, palpitations, and tachycardia.¹⁸

Neroli is a natural tranquilizer, giving a feeling of peace and calming anxiety.¹⁹ It has been described as “helping with problems of an emotional nature.”²⁰ It also has a “positive effect on the central nervous system.”²¹ In addition to these qualities it can help with palpitations and nervous dyspepsia.²²

Lavender (*angustifolia*) is traditional calming oil. It helps alleviate nervous tension but can also be helpful for those experiencing nausea with panic attacks as well as the muscle tension that may come

along as well with these.²³ It is beneficial in helping lower the blood pressure and balancing the central nervous system.²⁴

Roman Chamomile is a “very relaxing oil, removing anxiety, tension, anger and fear.”²⁵ All these states can be characteristic of what one would experience during or just prior to a panic attack. This oil can then promote feelings of comfort and ease.²⁶

Finally, Sweet Marjoram is “one of the most sedating and calming”²⁷ of the oils. It has a calming effect upon the central nervous system which can help relieve anxiety and stress.²⁸ It is a hypotensive and can increase circulation.²⁹

For blends to use in an inhaler are the following:

- Cedarwood-3 drops, Sweet Marjoram-4 drops, Roman Chamomile-4 drops
- Frankincense-3 drops, Lavender-4 drops, Neroli-4 drops
- Vetiver-4 drops, Ylang ylang-4 drops, Rose-4 drops

These combinations can also be used for a topical application as referred to previously. I would use a 3% dilution. The base notes would require 5 drops and the middle notes 6 each. Again I have found this combination and placement within the crease of the arm at the elbow helpful when the sensation of a panic attack may begin. Though, I have found the direct inhalation most useful when the panic attack has already started.

For those struggling with panic attacks, essential oils are safe and effective ways to combat them quickly. From my research and experience, the most effective combination of oils are those that will ground the Root Chakra combined with traditional anti-anxiety oils. I believe that when a panic attack begins, because of the physical symptoms brought on by a panic attack, that the self becomes ungrounded. The blended combination aids with the physical symptoms experienced during panic attacks along with the more ethereal/energetic disturbances brought on by these.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limbic_system

² <http://health.howstuffworks.com/mentalhealth/anxiety/panic-attack.htm>

³ http://helpguide/mental/panic_disorder_anxiety_attack_symptom_treatment.htm

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- ⁴ Davis, P., *Aromatherapy, A-Z*, pg. 135, C.W. Daniel 1988
- ⁵ Worwood, V., *The Fragrant Mind*, pg. 179, New World Library 1996
- ⁶ Lawless, J., *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Essential Oils*, pg. 108, 156, 160, Element 1995
- ⁷ Walters, C., *Aromatherapy an Illustrated Guide*, pg. 59, Element 1998
- ⁸ Walters, C., as above, pg. 59
- ⁹ Lawless, J., as above, pg. 222
- ¹⁰ Lawless, J., as above, pg. 222
- ¹¹ Walters, C., as above, pg. 117
- ¹² Davis, P., as above, pg. 342
- ¹³ Walters, C., as above, pg. 117
- ¹⁴ Walters, C., as above, pg. 109
- ¹⁵ Walters, C., as above, pg. 109
- ¹⁶ Walters, C., as above, pg. 57
- ¹⁷ Lawless, J., as above, pg. 104
- ¹⁸ Lawless, J., as above, pg. 104
- ¹⁹ Walters, C., as above, pg. 65
- ²⁰ Davis, P., as above, pg. 236
- ²¹ Walters, C., as above, pg. 65
- ²² Lawless, J., as above, pg. 117
- ²³ Lawless, J., as above, pg. 162
- ²⁴ Walters, C., as above, pg. 89
- ²⁵ Walters, C., as above, pg. 61
- ²⁶ Walters, C., as above, pg. 61
- ²⁷ Walters, C., as above, pg. 100
- ²⁸ Walters, C., as above, pg. 101
- ²⁹ Lawless, J., as above, pg. 187