

Essential Oils, the Sense of Smell, & Human Intelligence

By Holly Dunbar, LMT, Herbalist

 Aromatherapy has an obvious connection to the olfactory system, our sense of smell, whose nerves extend directly into the brain. The olfactory bulb sends an odorant signal to the limbic system of the brain in the space of 1-3 seconds. Smell is the only sense humans possess that has this direct pathway to the brain. Also known as the “old brain,” because it’s association with our primal urges and evolutionary development as humans, the limbic system governs both primitive and emotional drives, such as thirst and hunger, sexual urges, emotions, and the habits and behaviors which define our personality. It is what drives our choices between attraction and revulsion, safety or danger, and pursuit or avoidance.

Despite our attempts to personalize our smells with perfumes, the primitive brain still is guided by our subtle odors and pheromones when choosing a sexual mate. Studies have shown a correlation to compatible smells in couples that may determine the success of the relationship. Regular sexual intercourse between couples has proven to have a regulatory effect on the menstrual cycle, influenced by the chemically complex array of smells that stimulate the glands effectively.

There is also a well-established link between the sense of smell and human intelligence. An underdeveloped nasal bone is a common condition in mental retardation. Anencephalic babies, born without most or all of a brain, are also born without a nose. Improper right or left brain development will tend to have a corresponding nasal underdevelopment on the same side. Prolonged loss of smell can also lead to atrophy of other senses, and eventual brain degeneration.

Essential oils affect a change in brain waves in 1-3 seconds, which has been measured through EEG scans to increase or sedate certain brain waves. Lavender through the scans measured a calming response, while jasmine a more stimulating movement. Essential oils can be used to enhance mental cognition, and increase focus through inhalation and other external applications. They have been shown to ease depression, alleviate anxiety, and stimulate appetite in anorexics, all disorders that often elude treatment with drugs and other therapies.

Aromatherapy is often mistaken for a simplistic method of smelling something to feel better, but the olfactory portion and its effects on the brain, mood, and emotions are just one aspect of their potential. With a small molecular structure, essential oils are effectively absorbed through the skin, and transmitted through the circulatory and lymphatic systems. They have anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic, antiseptic, diuretic, alterative, sedative, and nervine properties, to name just a handful.

**Using Essential Oils to Change Habits, Create Ritual,**

**& Reinforce Affirmations**

* Choose 1-3 oils that really “speak” to you. These oils may inspire you to breathe more deeply, invoke a memory, make you smile, or simply resonate with you in a way you can’t explain. Whatever the reason, choose them for that reaction, not because of what properties they may possess.
* Blot a tissue or thicker piece of paper with 1-3 drops of the oil daily. Carry this with you throughout the day. Before you start a meditation or yoga session, say a prayer, read or say aloud your goal or affirmation, breathe deeply this essence you have chosen. Close your eyes to further the intention.
* Likewise, when a familiar habit beckons that you are trying to unload, pull out this blotter and experience the sense it invokes. Do you feel more level, calm, excited? Whatever the change, realize it is indeed that, a change. Often, our small fixes throughout the day are simply a need for a break in the mundane, a “reward.” With this awareness, now do something different. Take a walk, call a friend, turn off Facebook, drink a healthy tea,

play with your children or pets in a fully undistracted way.

Repeat this 5-6 short times in a week and it becomes your new “habit.”

* Start your day with a short self-massage and stretches incorporating some essential oils. This need be only a five minute dedication, but it reaffirms the message to thyself: “I’m in need of nourishment, and there are no apologies needed.”