

Health by a nose 07/23/2003
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Banner Elk therapist says aromas can be therapeutic

The following is part three in a five-part series examining the local effect of alternative medicine. Smell is one of the most primitive and powerful survival mechanisms, warning us of danger or allowing us to associate specific memories with specific smells. One of the fastest-growing areas of holistic healing takes smell a step beyond, elevating it to a source of emotional and physical well-being. Aromatherapy is a relatively new discipline when compared to acupuncture or even surgery, though its basics are in the herbal and olfactory habits of ancient Egyptians and Indians and then into the salves and potions of aromatherapy. Kelly Holland Azzaro of Ashi Therapy in Banner Elk is a registered Aromatherapist, a credential given by the Aromatherapy Registration Council and is also a certified clinical aromatherapy practitioner and Licensed Massage Therapist.



Azzaro became interested in aromatherapy, holistic health and massage nearly two decades ago while in high school. She had received some aromatherapy and massage from a chiropractor and later became a chiropractic assistant in the office. She read more about aromatherapy and studied with world-renowned aromatherapists for her 20+years of training which led to receiving professional credentials and began blending her own line of aromatherapy products, Ashi Aromatics tm.

"Aromatherapy is so much more than just something that smells good," Azzaro said. "If I can teach them (clients) about the benefits of one oil, then I'm doing my job."

While essential oils are often linked to massage therapy, Azzaro said the power of inhaling different natural scents is instantaneous and "goes beyond the blood/brain level," where massage can often take 30 minutes for the oils to penetrate the skin.

She said that different oils can have a variety of effects on the body, from a calming effect to an invigorating uplift. They may also help with some breathing difficulties, cold symptoms, bacterial and viral infections, as an aphrodisiac and to aid a whole host of emotional and physical troubles.

The National Association For Holistic Aromatherapy defines it as "the art and science of utilizing naturally extracted aromatic essences from plants to balance, harmonize and promote the health of body, mind and spirit."

The term was coined by a holistic French chemist in 1928, and since then has slowly been gaining acceptance among holistic health practitioners, even though there has been scant scientific research into the field and the supposed benefits of essential oils.

Skeptical Inquirer Magazine, usually known for debunking claims of UFOs and

extrasensory perception, put aromatherapy in its crosshairs in a 1996 article.

Author Lynn McCutcheon said that she could find no research supporting the idea that natural oils were superior to the synthetic oils that were identical at a molecular level.

"Given that essential oils contain several compounds, it seems possible that a natural oil might have more than one active agent," McCutcheon wrote. "If that is so, then aroma therapists should be spearheading the research effort to determine which chemical compounds are inducing the changes they claim are taking place.

Instead, most of them seem all too willing to assume that natural oils are better, and that there is no need to defend this assertion with any rationale or research evidence."

Aromatherapy has gained more credence in Europe than in the United States, where no regulatory body exists for the practice except for sections governing perfume and cosmetics. In France, aromatherapy is part of the course of study for getting a medical degree.

Azzaro said that Europe is also ahead of the United States in standardization and testing of oils. Since testing is an expensive process, Azzaro said she sticks with a few companies which she has found to be reputable.

When a new client walks in the door, Azzaro gives a health intake, having the client fill out a health history, asking why the client made the appointment, and what are the short-term and long-term goals of treatment. She also looks for contraindications, or potential health risks.

One of the main risks of aromatherapy is an allergy, whether an oil is inhaled or rubbed into the skin. Some allergies are related to whole families of oils, so it's often easy to tell which oils should be avoided. If the oil is used in massage, then there are times when a massage shouldn't be performed, usually in situations where increased blood flow to a specific area is not advisable.

Since the oils are not ingested, they generally pose less risks than supplements or medicines which are taken internally. Some oils are used in over-the-counter remedies, such as eucalyptus in vapor rubs designed to help cease congestion.

However, Azzaro notes that there are 300 species of eucalyptus, and only about 6 of them are commonly used, which is where knowledge and experience can make a difference.

Azzaro lets clients sample different kinds of the oils that she has blended herself. The blends are often of two or more oils for which she attributes specific properties.

For example, she sells a "synergy blend" formula called "Renaissance" that contains aromatic essences from herbs and plants used by monks to ward off the Black Plague during the Middle Ages.

While Azzaro is pleased with the increased awareness and popularity of aromatherapy, she also believes interested people should consult with someone who has knowledge of the oils before using them, since they are so readily available for

purchase on the Internet, in health food stores and grocery stores.

She said there are three species of lavender, a scent which most people associate with relaxation. However, there is a "spike lavender" that actually increases blood pressure, causing the opposite of the desired effect. Azzaro said that outlets sometimes sell oils in which the staff have no training. She sees her role as being an educator of her clients so they will be empowered to blend or use their own oils.

"I let them smell first," she said. "If they love the smell, it's going to be helpful for them."

She sees aromatherapy as a one more tool to work toward the goal of personal wellness. "Natural medicine is so much more affordable for the consumer," she said. "People want to feel better and they want to understand what's going on."

Azzaro reports an increasing number of referrals from Western, or "allopathic," doctors. She disdains any hint of "New Age" connotations to her practice.

"We don't claim to know it all, but we know what we know," she said.

"The whole thing is about taking care of the client. What is it we can do to help them feel better? We listen to the client's needs and have them participate in the healing process.

"It's an ancient art, very old, and I hope it keeps its art and beauty," she said. "I hope it doesn't get mass produced and lose that beauty, but I would love for it to be affordable so everybody can make it a part of their life."