

Aromatherapy could help substance use disorder patients, study finds

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Aromatherapy may alleviate stress in people undergoing treatment for substance use disorder which, in turn, could enhance their chances of a successful recovery, according to West Virginia University research. Credit: West Virginia University/Jennifer Shephard

Aromatherapy eases stress in people undergoing treatment for substance

use disorder which, in turn, could enhance their chances of a successful recovery, according to West Virginia University research. The study, which is ongoing, incorporates the use of essential oils as an integrative therapy that is part of a bigger picture model focusing on the whole person.

Researchers set out to determine whether the use of an aroma inhaler filled with bergamot essential oil produced an increase in comfort and ease, and a decrease in stress. For the study, comfort was defined as the experience of relief, while ease was defined as calmness amid distress.

"Those in treatment struggle to handle everyday living, overwhelming demands from work, family, the disease itself and even the treatment program," said Marian Reven, assistant professor in the WVU School of Nursing and a registered aromatherapist, who led the study. "Those individuals have identified that relieving distress and increasing comfort during substance use recovery is vital to their success."

Reven said [various studies](#) on [substance use disorder](#) treatment indicate that when people no longer have the drugs in their systems in sufficient amounts, they experience a loss of pleasure and an increased sensitivity to stress and anxiety.

Study participants, all in treatment for substance use disorder, report an increase of comfort and ease and a decrease in perception of stress after using the inhaler at least three times daily for one week. Participants track the frequency of administering the inhalers and rate their comfort levels in daily logbooks. Results include reduction in stress and anxiety, and an increase in feeling calm and relaxed.

Reven said she chose bergamot for the study because it is soothing to the central nervous system. She would also like to explore the effects of other [essential oils](#) such as various citruses, lavender and sustainably

sourced sandalwood.

Extracted from the rind of the bergamot fruit, the [essential oil](#) has a fresh, citrus scent. It's used in many perfumes and soaps and gives Earl Gray tea its signature flavor and aroma. Not only do bergamot and other essential oils used in aromatherapy smell good and thus provide an uplifting psychological boost, there's a physiological benefit, too, Reven said. Components in the essential oils act via the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for processing and regulating emotion and memory.

Reven said exploring how essential oils can complement a treatment plan—for substance use disorder and other diseases—falls in line with the evolving approach to person-centered care. Other methods include acupuncture, mindfulness, meditation and yoga.

"The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health is calling for this groundswell of whole person health," Reven said. "This involves all the health choices people make. Integrating aromatherapy into a [treatment](#) plan to increase comfort and ease stress and improve the person's quality of life is one example."

The research is a spinoff of Reven's [2020 aromatherapy study](#) in which nurses reported feeling significantly less stressed, anxious, fatigued and overwhelmed after wearing aromatherapy patches during their shifts at WVU Cancer Institute Mary Babb Randolph Cancer Center.

She said both studies fill a gap in the search for ways to promote health and well-being while bringing to light the need for in-depth research on dosage and frequency. She also hopes the findings can be applied to future research using various essential oils for patients receiving chemotherapy and other treatments such as palliative care, as well people seeking to improve their overall health.

"The comments from this study with substance use disorder patients gave me hope and I want to look at what populations need the same kind of support," Reven said. "This could also include people before they are sick because the need to be happy is part of the whole person health. There is a lot of work to be done to show how aromatherapy can impact health and well-being and I look forward to many years of discovery in research."

Provided by West Virginia University

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