

Dorene Petersen: The Promise of Aromatherapy

The improvement of mood, cognitive function and/or physical health has long been the nebulous promise of aromatherapeutic practice and products. Today, the category, labeled “aromatherapy,” includes products such as traditional holistic aromatology-type products (essential oils for application toward mental, physical and/or spiritual well-being), air fresheners, body washes with “energizing” scents and premium holistic beauty products. While products continue to enter the marketplace with heretofore unsubstantiated claims (anti-aging or anti-depressant fragrances, for example), major consumer goods companies are investing in aromatherapy innovations to harness the physiological and psychological power of scent.

“Aromatherapy is ... one of the few therapies in the holistic health repertoire that offers both a physiological and a psychological result simultaneously,” says Dorene Petersen, founder and president of American College of Healthcare Sciences. “That was always of interest to me.” Petersen, whose college offers an accredited, online Master of Science in Aromatherapy (www.achs.edu), will speak as part of the annual conference of the International Federation of Essential Oils and Aroma Trades (www.ifeat.org) taking place in San Francisco September 29 to October 3. Originally a naturopath practicing in her native New Zealand and relying on essential oils produced for the fragrance or flavor sector, Petersen has spent the last three decades focusing on sourcing high-quality pesticide-free and organic essential oils for the therapeutic sector. Now based in the United States, she says she’s increasingly focused on research-based work in aromatherapy. “I’m very interested in sound research and human clinical trials that are able to show the therapeutic efficacy of essential oils and specifically which constituents are active within the essential oils that appear to be causing that physiological reaction,” Petersen says. “Generally, it’s a synergistic effect [among several key components], but research has shown that sometimes one constituent

is more active than the oil itself—that doesn’t happen very often.” According to a 2012 white paper focusing on oils sourced from Indonesia, Petersen’s research found that the top 10 essential oils in the United States by aromatherapists were:^a

- Sandalwood
- Patchouli
- Basil
- Black pepper
- Fennel
- Ginger
- Vetiver
- Lemongrass
- Ylang-ylang
- Cinnamon



“The thing I am excited to dispel is the considerable degree of skepticism regarding aromatherapy,” Petersen says of both consumers and traditional industry. “It’s interesting how most people will agree that ... the smell of baking bread wafting out of a store has significant positive psychological impact on people, but a lot of those people won’t recognize the fact that essential oils and aromatherapy might have a similar sort of therapeutic effect.”

Part of the reason for this, she acknowledges, is the inherent subjectivity of psychological changes that occur in response to the topical or inhaled application of essential oils. (Petersen prefers not to use nature-identical aromas in her practice.) Because the reactions are linked to the experiences of the subject, including personal history and cultural influences, the outcomes vary among individuals.

“People think, ‘How could it possibly work?’” says Petersen. “You have to individualize it, there’s no doubt about it. That’s the skill of an expert aromatherapist. It’s not an easy thing to understand.” Despite the skepticism and the research work that remains to be done in the category, Petersen agrees with many analysts that aromatherapy is set to continue to grow significantly, a reality the fragrance industry cannot ignore.

^aD Petersen, U.S. Trends in Aromatherapy. <http://info.achs.edu/download-us-trends-in-aromatherapy-white-paper2/> (2012)

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