

How can Aromatherapy Help People with Dementia?

Reducing Anxiety and Agitation with Aromatherapy

Imagine waking up and not knowing where you are; then strangers come and take you into another room where they take your clothes off, put you into a small confined space on freezing cold tiles and turn on a tap that squirts warm water all over you. No wonder you might resist and want to prevent these strangers from touching you, let alone rubbing you with soap or a cloth. Not surprisingly, you might yell out and use swear words that normally you'd never use.

People with dementia are often thought of as being “difficult” or “irritable”, and sometimes can be rude or aggressive in ways, which are not only distressing for their carers, but can also be physically damaging. I tend to imagine that when people with dementia are being rude or aggressive, they are in fact acting out of a desire to protect themselves against a threat. Whether the threat is real or imagined doesn't matter.

Fortunately not all people with dementia live with this amount of terror, but for those who do, life is not easy. Aromatherapy appears to be providing an alternative to the use of anti-psychotic and sedative drugs that often are prescribed for so-called difficult behaviours.

A few years ago, I was approached to help evaluate an aromatherapy care program in a nursing home in Gosford. The nurse who approached me was also a trained aromatherapist, and had been using aromatherapy there for about six years. As I did not know much about aged care or dementia, I spent quite a while listening to her stories about her residents and the effects that aromatherapy had on them.

The effects ranged from helping people to get to sleep, and sleep longer, through to helping people be less withdrawn and more sociable... all of which I would have expected from my knowledge of the oils.

Then she told me that people who restlessly paced the corridors in her nursing home quite often were offered an essential oil spritz of Lavender, Sweet Marjoram and Patchouli that calmed them down and helped them relax enough to get some sleep. She also mentioned that one gentleman with dementia who kept exposing himself to unsuspecting female residents stopped doing it as frequently after he had regular hand massages with Sweet Marjoram oil in a cream base.

Our evaluation revealed that a relaxing aromatherapy blend helped some people a great deal, whereas others did not seem to be affected by it or even behaved a little worse. The aromatherapy treatment seemed to reduce difficult behaviours most when people were not being handled by nursing staff, and the effects appeared to continue for at least one month after use of the relaxing blend.

Since then, I have surveyed several other centres that use aromatherapy for people with dementia, and the consensus is that aromatherapy is seen as very beneficial for reducing anxiety and agitation, though not so effective for reducing aggressiveness. Interestingly, I also found that aromatherapy was being used to manage arthritic pain and discomfort. Several nurses I spoke to said that they felt pain was one of the main causes of challenging behaviours and that they found aromatherapy to be of great benefit.

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