



How aromatherapy can  
alleviate various ailments

## Description

# A conversation with certified Aromatherapist Tresa Staeven

By **Craig Cormack**

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In all the years I practiced massage, I have used aromatherapy in a very basic way. I used it for relaxation, and to help my clients breathe better but I never realized the amount of training that goes into certification. Moreover, I never realized that certain essential oils are contraindicated with medications. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with **Tresa Staeven**, certified Aromatherapist and owner of **Scented Path Aromatherapy Wellness Clinic** in N.D.G.

**Craig Cormack:** *What are some of the conditions or symptoms and illnesses you have treated using Aromatherapy?*

**Tresa Staeven:** That is a great question and, as a whole, never straightforward to answer. As a certified Aromatherapist, we don't diagnose, we don't cure conditions, but aromatherapy can alleviate or lessen the burden of various ailments. In practicing aromatherapy, I look at the ailments from a holistic wellness perspective and select essential oils based on their therapeutic properties.

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**Craig Cormack:** *Treating is a tricky word?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Exactly, but in my time as an Aromatherapist, I have used Aromatherapy to alleviate the pain from things like headaches, insomnia, plantar fasciitis, and random muscular aches and pains. I have used



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aromatherapy to help others manage stress, aid them in their sleep, their digestion and much more. I am an advocate of helping people to breathe better, have better breathing patterns, and engaging the nervous system to calm the body down. I have helped clients alleviate their toe fungus, acne or rosacea, fight thinning or falling hair, by creating serums or hair masks. Aromatherapy can be used to help build up immunity as well.

**Craig Cormack:** *Have you worked with people with major illnesses such as cancer or Multiple Sclerosis?*

**Tresa Staeven:** I haven't worked with anyone with cancer but typically, with these kinds of clients, we would not be treating the cancer but all the effects tangential to it, all of the things that the person would be dealing with daily, such as stress, anxiety, worry, etc. Many cancer patients have nausea from chemo, so we can work on that. Other patients may have problems sleeping, so we can deal with that by formulating a blend to help them sleep.

M.S. no. However, my own father had a debilitating condition for many years, which the doctors thought was M.S. until he got an accurate diagnosis from the Mayo clinic. In his later years, and especially in his final days, we did a lot of aromatherapy just to help with anxiety and agitation. A lot is going on at the end of life where you are not necessarily able to speak or share what is happening. Aromatherapy, in these cases, can help to relax the body.

**Craig Cormack:** *Is this aromatherapy being used in a palliative approach?*

'I haven't worked with anyone with cancer but typically... we would not be treating the cancer but all the effects tangential to it, all of the things that the person would be dealing with daily, such as stress, anxiety, worry, etc.'

**Tresa Staeven:** Exactly

**Craig Cormack:** *Have you read about people using Aromatherapy for palliative care?*

**Tresa Staeven:** I am starting to. It is something that is generally covered in getting certified. We are trained in the different avenues of practice, and palliative care is one of them. But I have started to follow some Aromatherapists in the palliative care setting. One of them is based in the Netherlands. In trying to understand some things in Dutch, it is interesting to read about their experiences in this setting.

**Craig Cormack:** *What about fear and phobias? We were talking about the dentist's office the other day.*

**Tresa Staeven:** There are many fears – spiders, heights, flying, etc. Often in those situations, relaxing the body and mind gets you to adjust to your fears. In some cases, you have no choice because spiders are around, and in others, you don't have to fly, in most cases that is. If you have a fear of crowded spaces, it could cause you to have a panic attack. We try to understand the root of the fear, the cause of the problem and how we can divert the reaction to something manageable and liveable. This is where Aromatherapy can be beneficial, especially through inhalation. In a crowded situation, you could have a blend of essential oils that you could breathe in and settle yourself down. In such a situation, I would be a big advocate of using an aromatherapy bracelet. These have porous lava stones where the oils are "absorbed." You have it with you wherever you are, and it's so easy to use. With my clients, I typically refer to them as a "Linus Blanket," referencing Linus from the Peanuts cartoons.

**Craig Cormack:** *Do all the oil blends pass the blood-brain barrier?*

**Tresa Staeven:** They do as the majority of chemical constituents in essential oils are terpenes and terpenoids. Many of these can traverse nasal mucosa when inhaled and penetrate the skin when applied topically. Due to their small size and lipophilic properties, some terpenes can absorb into the bloodstream and cross the blood-brain



barrier (Agatonovic-Kustrin et al., 2019).

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A certified Aromatherapist will typically have two methods available to help a client. One is through inhalation, in which your olfactory nerves deliver the messaging to your limbic system. Your limbic system is responsible for your hormones, your behaviours, your memories and your emotions. This connection to the limbic system results in the sending of neurotransmitters. For example, the smell of smoke triggers your autonomic nervous system, fight or flight, and then you react. You can either rush to the scene and help or run away. It is the same system when you walk into your favourite restaurant and you smell the food, or your grandma's house where she is baking your favourite cookies, and the smell brings happy memories. They comfort and delight you. Also, smells can bring you back in time, just like a song can – like a time machine. On social media, a couple of days ago, I posted a quote from Helen Keller that exactly speaks to that: "Smell is a potent wizard that transports us a thousand miles and all the years we have lived".

'A certified Aromatherapist will typically have two methods available to help a client. One is through inhalation, in which your olfactory nerves deliver the messaging to your limbic system.'

The other way the essential oils are delivered is topically through the skin. This approach is used more to deal with pain or physical ailments, like a massage oil for toe fungus, wound care, or a lotion for muscle tension. We never apply essential oils directly to the skin. We always use a carrier oil like almond oil, grape seed oil, etc.

We can make lotions out of shea or cocoa butter. The carrier serves two purposes. First of all, it helps the skin not become sensitized by the oils. Some essential oils are very sensitizing and will immediately burn upon contact. Cinnamon is a good example. Peppermint can be. Every person is different, so everyone reacts differently. The carriers also allow the essential oil to penetrate through the pores in the skin and get into the system.

**Craig Cormack:** *We talked about how some people take essential oils orally. What do you think of that?*

**Tresa Staeven:** There is a lot of information about ingesting essential oils. Certified Aromatherapists in both Canada and the U.S. cannot advise on taking essential oils internally through ingestion. The reason behind this is a couple of things. One, essential oils, while they are natural, are unnaturally concentrated.

You can smell a lavender plant, you can touch a lavender plant, and there are plenty of desserts that include lavender as an ingredient but it takes a large volume of the plant to make a small amount of oil. Rose oil, which is one of the most expensive oils out there, requires 6000 to 10,000 rose petals to make a 5 ml bottle of rose oil. It takes one pound of Frankincense to make 30 ml of oil. Therefore, essential oils are very concentrated and thus very sensitizing. By ingesting them, they can burn, irritate and cause issues to mucus membranes (tongue, throat, digestive system).

Furthermore, because the oils are concentrated, and because of the chemical properties and constituents that make them up, it causes the liver to do a lot of work to break them down. If you keep working your liver in this fashion, your body doesn't get used to it, and it can cause long-term effects like liver damage. I know of someone who ingested Eucalyptus oil over many years, a drop or two a day and ended up with cirrhosis of the liver. So, there is care to be taken.



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Now, if you have proper medical training, a doctor and someone who specialized in aromatherapy, then you can make more informed decisions about when, where and how much when it comes to ingesting oils. This type of training is available in Europe but not practiced here or in the United States.

Also, a certified Aromatherapist will never have their patients apply oils or insert oils into body orifices, nose, eyes, ears and down below because those areas are sensitive and have mucous membranes.

**Craig Cormack:** *How far back does Aromatherapy go?*

**Tresa Staeven:** It goes back a few thousand years ago with the ancient Greeks and Egyptians using plants for healing. There are plenty of examples where the Greek Army used Myrrh as a wound healer during times of war. The majority of essential oils are extracted from plants through a distillation process. The distillation process used today was modernized/improved by Avicenna in the 10th century.

**Craig Cormack:** *Where did you receive your training, and how long was it?*

**Tresa Staeven:** I trained here in Quebec. The program is 450 hours – 60 hours were in-person class time, and the rest of it was online learning and case studies. Candidates have two years to complete the work.

The program is comprehensive, covering topics such as the History of Aromatherapy, Pharmacology, Anatomy and Physiology, Specific Essential Oils and Carrier Oils, and Chemistry – essentially a variety of topics every week. We had exercises in each lesson to learn blending practices and to help us understand the essential oils innately by recording our reactions and responses by doing smell tests. It was interesting to see that there were differences in our reactions after time. Bottom notes and top notes would change. We got to understand how our olfactory senses work in terms of smell.

Following my training, with my certification, I am a professional member of professional associations: the **Canadian Federation of Aromatherapists** and the **Alliance of International Aromatherapists**.

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**Craig Cormack:** *Did you feel that your ability to smell improved by taking Aromatherapy classes?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Yes, your palette improves. But some days it is better than others.

**Craig Cormack:** ***What are the most remarkable changes you have seen using Aromatherapy?***

**Tresa Staeven:** If you are dealing with mental health, there are so many variables that need to be considered. Combinations work. Once people feel empowered, they can take ownership of their well-being and begin to get better. One client who came in was very transparent and open, and looking for healing they asked some questions. I gave my perspective, and they started to cry. So, we then dug into that. I was kind of a mirror for them, and they



needed that reflection. When I saw the client two weeks later, they were full of smiles, and the third time, laughing, full of life. I know it wasn't just the Aromatherapy because she made other changes, but the combination of it all helped.

I have a client with a lot of back pain due to an accident years ago. This has only gotten worse as they have aged. I made a blend for them in a roller bottle, which they roll on. It doesn't take care of the pain 100% but enough that they can get up and do what they want without feeling hindered by pain.

Every person is different in terms of what their needs are. Right now, we are in allergy season. I usually suffer, and I have found that just sniffing a couple of different oils helps alleviate a lot of congestion, runny nose, etc.

**Craig Cormack:** *Can Aromatherapy affect behaviours such as nervous ticks?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Yes, I believe it may be possible to improve processing too. Often it helps get certain behaviours under control and builds on successes. When we look at mental and emotional behaviours, often it is not just one blend. It may take a few tweaks to get the body into balance. So, we modify the blend to build or stabilize depending on what a person needs. As far as the bacterial aspect is concerned some oils are antibacterial and antimicrobial.

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Concerning healing, I try to work with the client where they are at the moment. I will never give them a laundry list of the things they need to do because it will be too overwhelming for them. I advocate little steps over time that make a difference.

**Craig Cormack:** *Have you worked with seniors?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Yes, and most of them are still very active (junior seniors). So still living in their homes. Pain management is my role with them.

**Craig Cormack:** *What about Dementia with its symptoms such as anxiety and roaming?*

**Tresa Staeven:** I haven't yet. Again, I believe the approach would be trying to balance out the most obvious behaviours that are not typical of who this person was. We can't bring back the whole person, but we can take the edginess or stress down with Aromatherapy.

**Craig Cormack:** *Many people old and young have arthritis. Have you dealt with this?*

**Tresa Staeven:** We deal with muscular aches and pains, pain in the joints, and arthritis. I had a client who believed she had arthritis. She had a hard time sleeping at night because of her knee. She thought she had Restless Leg Syndrome, was prescribed Bio Freeze and it worked for a couple of weeks. She then came to me. I did a blend, had her apply it to her knee, put a compress on it, and then made her walk up and down the hall. It worked for the first two nights, and then it kept on working. Her sleep went from five to seven hours per night.

**Craig Cormack:** *Do you think seniors could be trained to use Aromatherapy safely?*



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**Tresa Staeven:** Depending on what they are using it for. For pain, they may be able to do it themselves. But, in alot of cases, it would be good for them to have assistance. For mood control, you inhale it. For inhalation, you canhave Aromatherapy stickers or felt safety pinned on clothing to deliver the scent.

‘Concerning healing, I try to work with the client where they are at the moment... I advocate little steps over time that make a difference.’

**Craig Cormack:** *Is there a blend that all people could use without the worry of contraindications?*

**Tresa Staeven:** There is no one-for-all type blend. Aromatherapists need to ensure that there are no contraindications so they look at the health/medical history, medications and supplements in determining which essential oils can be used and at what levels. There are so many drugs in use, that it would have to be researched.

**Craig Cormack:** *What are the most common contraindications between essential oils and medications?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Blood thinners are a common medication that is contraindicated with essential oils like cinnamon or clove. There are health conditions that are also contraindicated. For example, high blood pressure is contraindicated for rosemary or thyme essential oils. Eucalyptus is contraindicated for people suffering from Epilepsy. Black Pepper can overstimulate the kidneys. Other oils are contraindicated for pregnancy and, even then, it depends. For example, if you are in your first trimester or you are breastfeeding. There are no straight rules for everything. Also, you have to consider allergies. The same thing with the carrier oils, due to the nuts in them. In the case of women, some essential oils may interfere with hormones, while others may help balance them.

**Craig Cormack:** *There are so many layers that you have to go through to get the right blend, right?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Yes! There is a lot of information and new research being done all the time. To help navigate through everything, I created my own database of oils with information about them, their therapeutic properties, contraindications and other safety considerations.

**Craig Cormack:** *When you are blending oils, will you emphasize certain oils over others to achieve a certain effect?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Yes, if that is needed. We always try to achieve a balance so we don't go too far in one direction or another while factoring in what the client likes and if there are contraindications. What I have noticed is that with essential oils, less is more, and less has more effect, which is counterintuitive in our culture but seems to be the case. I have had clients who, when we lowered the concentration in their blend, had better results. Even if you can't smell the oil, it is still working.

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**Craig Cormack:** *Do essential oils expire?*

**Tresa Staeven:** Most essential oils have a two-year shelf life, some up to seven or eight years. This, of course, depends upon how it is stored, where and at what temperature.

Essential oils begin to degrade when they come in contact with oxygen, known as oxidation. Oxidation ultimately causes changes to the chemical compounds that make up the essential oil. Other factors that impact the strength





and effectiveness of essential oils are exposure to light and heat. Most essential oils are stored in amber-coloured bottles as the dark glass protects against light including UV light. Proper storage is the key.

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