

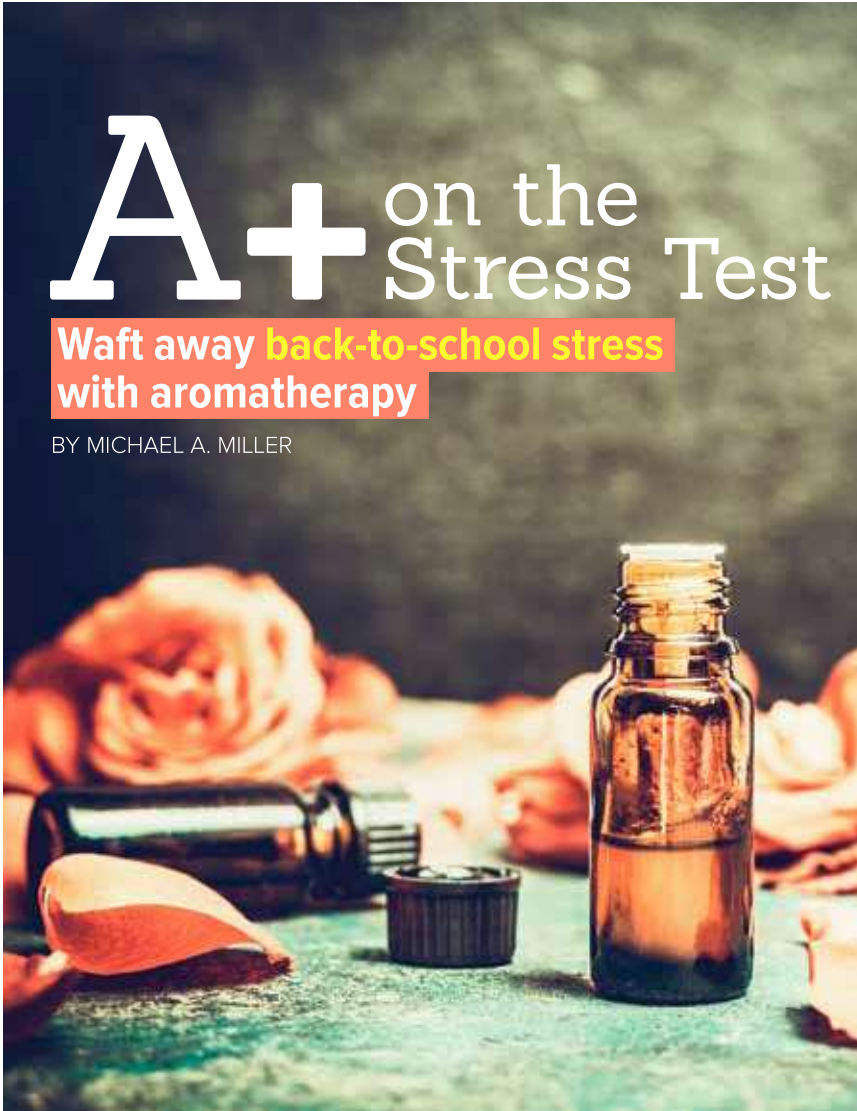
inner balance

Building stronger mind-body connections

A+ on the Stress Test

Waft away back-to-school stress with aromatherapy

BY MICHAEL A. MILLER



The leaves are falling, the air is crisp, and, finally, your little terrorizers are out of sight, out of mind, and not trying to highlight the dog's hair with a yellow Sharpie. Now you have a little time for yourself, right?

Not so fast. Many moms become busier—and more stressed—once back-to-school season explodes their to-do lists into a flurry of shopping trips, paperwork, and scheduling. Seasonal advertisements try to convince moms that seven-year-olds need designer jeans, lest they become an outcast before the first bell rings, and social media can catalyze online bento-box lunch competitions between over-achieving moms. Among planning carpools, organizing extra-curricular activities, and fitting in childcare, statistics that claim women make 80 percent of all household decisions are looking a bit conservative. Of course, dads help out too, but the back-to-school season can really put the whammy on moms' equilibrium, rather than serve them a much-needed siesta.

THE STRESS RESPONSE

When someone encounters a stressful event, like being late to soccer practice or shooing half-sleeping teens out of the house, the brain perceives danger and the stress response is triggered. The amygdala, an area in the brain that helps with emotional processing, notifies the brain's command center—the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus barks orders to the autonomic nervous system, which has two parts—the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

At this junction, the sympathetic nervous system responds to the stress by pumping adrenaline and cortisol through your veins, heightening your ability for fighting or fleeing. Once danger has passed, the parasympathetic nervous system regains control, promoting the “rest and digest” response that restores the body. However, chronic low-level stress keeps the hypothalamus in panic mode, preventing parasympathetic intervention. When adrenaline and cortisol are not used up, it wreaks havoc on body and mind and causes unwanted symptoms of stress.

SMELLS LIKE CALM

You can contend with the fight-or-flight response before damaging symptoms occur by practicing aromatherapy to reduce stress. A study published in the *Japanese Journal of Pharmacology* measured sympathetic nervous activity by observing changes in systolic blood pressure. The researchers found that black pepper, fennel, and grapefruit essential oils caused a 1.5- to 2.5-fold increase in sympathetic activity, while rose and patchouli essential oil decreased activity by 40 percent. Rose essential oil also caused adrenaline levels to plummet by 30 percent. (Stop and smell the roses, indeed!) In another study, lavender essential oil was shown to reduce cortisol levels.

Personal preference plays a role in aroma-therapeutic results as well. Inhaled aromas travel the limbic system, which is considered the center for instinctual behaviors, memories, and emotions. Aromatherapy can trigger feelings that your brain associates with past memories and experiences, calming or otherwise. Your personal aroma-infused associations are likely different than another stressed-out mom's, so a mom who got lemon popsicles as a kid might have a completely different reaction to lemon essential oil than the mom who choked down lemon cough syrup instead.

Diffusing Tension

This is a powerful diffuser recipe that uses the essential oils best known for their stress-reducing benefits. It packs a punch as it delivers the sedative, tranquilizing, antidepressant, and nervine properties right to your brain and soul. Your stress level will sink lower and lower as you take in this aromatic blend.

3 drops vetiver oil
2 drops rosemary oil
2 drops basil oil
2 drops clary sage oil
Water

Most diffusers come with directions for using essential oils. Add the manufacturer's recommended amount of water and the oils to the diffuser and run your delightful diffuser several times a day to receive the desired effect. *Source: ESSENTIAL OILS FOR HEALING: OVER 400 ALL-NATURAL RECIPES FOR EVERYDAY AILMENTS by VANNOY GENTLES FITE with MICHELE GENTLES McDANIEL and VANNOY LIN REYNOLDS*

"Once you have had a good relaxing experience with an essential oil, it will be remembered in your brain and can be triggered when needed by just a quick whiff," said Joni Keim, an essential oils expert with Alambika USA. Many essential oils have stress-relieving properties, but Keim suggests starting with bergamot, chamomile

roman, neroli, lavender, clary sage, marjoram sweet, frankincense, or orange. To get a quick stress fix, simply breathe in the aroma that works for you directly from the bottle or from a tissue, or dilute it with a carrier oil and apply it topically. Aromatherapy becomes increasingly powerful when combined with a lifestyle that supports calmness. Take a look at how Keim suggests you can involve essential oils in your stress-relief regime.

SLEEP The sleep-stress cycle is a brutal affair. Survey findings from the American Psychology Association show that American adults lie awake from stress, and then stress about why they can't sleep. Luckily, essential oils can support sleep and relaxation.

TRY THIS: Mix 20 drops clary sage essential oil, 10 drops lavender essential oil, and 4 ounces water in a misting bottle. Shake well. Mist the area surrounding your bed and your upper chest, being careful to cover your eyes. This can be used at bedtime and during the night. Also consider diffusing this recipe for 10 minutes before getting into bed.

BREATHE Deep breathing helps you take in more oxygen and expel more carbon dioxide with each breath. According to the Harvard Medical School, this can slow the heartbeat and stabilize blood pressure. The opposite, a quickened heartbeat and high blood pressure, is symptomatic of stress.

TRY THIS: Place 15 drops of frankincense in 1 tablespoon of fractionated coconut oil or fragrance-free lotion. Apply to the upper chest and upper back. Sit comfortably with your back straight. Exhale completely through your mouth. Close your mouth and inhale the aroma through your nose for a count of three. Hold your breath for a count of five. Exhale through your mouth to a count of six. Repeat slowly and gently three more times.

MEDITATE Meditation allows you to focus on the moment and untangle

your mind, shedding mental chatter and stressors of past and future. It is practiced in many cultures and is experiencing a boom in popularity in the United States. Using essential oils during meditation can enhance the experience by grounding you and promoting a sense of calm. Certain oils also relax the mind and promote focus and concentration.

TRY THIS: Mix 20 drops frankincense essential oil, 10 drops cedarwood essential oil, and 4 ounces water in a misting bottle. Shake well. Mist the air in your vicinity and the palm of one hand. Pat hands together and breathe in the aroma from your palms through your nose. Pause and repeat. Perform your favorite meditation technique, or simply focus on your breathing—the sound of it, the feel of it—without judgement.

BATHE It's not hard to imagine submerging into a warm bath after a long day and feeling the stress melt away. This feeling of utter bliss can be compounded with essential oils. The warm bathwater stimulates circulation and eases muscle soreness, and can be combined with relaxing oils like lavender and even Epsom salts.

TRY THIS: Choose an essential oil with relaxing properties, such as rose, sandalwood, neroli, lavender, or chamomile roman. Mix 8 drops of the essential oil, or a blend, in 1 teaspoon of fractionated coconut oil or olive oil. (Some people like to mix it with a cup of whole milk.) Set aside. Fill the tub with warm water and immerse yourself. After you are in the tub, pour in the essential oil mixture and stir around you. Breathe in the aroma from your hands. Gently massage your skin. Relax for 10 to 15 minutes. [n5](#)