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- File: ■ Peppermint (*Mentha × piperita*)
- Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)
- Helichrysum (curry plant; *Helichrysum italicum*)
- Essential Oils
- Exhaustion
- Burnout

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RE: Aromatherapy with Peppermint, Basil, and Helichrysum Essential Oils for Mental Exhaustion and Burnout Relief

Varney E, Buckle J. Effect of inhaled essential oils on mental exhaustion and moderate burnout: A small pilot study. *J Altern Complement Med.* 2013;19(1):69-71.

Burnout is characterized by exhaustion related to chronic pressure at work or home. Aromatherapy may help alleviate symptoms of burnout. Lavender aromatherapy may reduce stress by inducing relaxation; however, this may not be optimal for burnout since it may exacerbate symptoms by increasing sedation and the inability to concentrate. Therefore, the authors decided to evaluate 2 stimulating essential oils to address the fatigue, and a balancing essential oil to address anxiety. Peppermint (*Mentha × piperita*) essential oil has been shown to increase alertness and mental clarity. Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) essential oil has been shown to reduce mental fatigue and has antidepressant properties. Helichrysum (curry plant; *Helichrysum italicum*) essential oil is known for its calming and soothing properties. Rose (*Rosa* spp.) water, as opposed to rose essential oil, was used as the control because it has a subtle aroma, and it is not known to have any therapeutic effects. The purpose of this randomized, double-blind, controlled pilot study was to assess the effect of inhalation of essential oils on the symptoms of mental exhaustion or burnout.

Adults (n = 14; aged 25-46 years) with self-assessed mental exhaustion or burnout participated in the study conducted at a private psychotherapy practice in Andover, Maine. The included subjects responded to an email sent to friends and colleagues. Subjects randomly received an aromatherapy mixture or placebo (rose water) in plastic personal inhalers. The aromatherapy mixture contained 4 drops of jojoba (*Simmondsia chinensis*) oil, 10 drops of peppermint essential oil (SunRose Aromatics; Bronx, New York), 8 drops of basil essential oil (Florihana Distributors; France), and 2 drops of helichrysum essential oil (Florihana Distributors). The control inhalers contained 4 drops of jojoba oil and 20 drops of rose water (Heritage Products; Virginia Beach, Virginia). A 0-10 point assessment scale was used to rate mental fatigue or mild burnout, where 10

= no burnout, feeling alert, focused, hopeful, and optimistic and 0 = extreme burnout, lack of attention at work, negative feelings, lack of focus, and drowsiness. The subjects rated mental fatigue/burnout 3 times per day. During week 1, baseline measurements were taken (no aromatherapy). During week 2, subjects inhaled the aromatherapy once per hour during working hours (i.e., approximately 7 times per day). Week 3 was the washout period, and subjects recorded their feelings without the use of aromatherapy.

At baseline, both groups had mild "difficulty focusing, drifting attention, feeling neutral or, just going through the motions of the day" (a score of 4 out of 10). During week 2, the aromatherapy group had a 21.1% improvement and the placebo group had an 11.3% improvement. During week 3, some of the improvement persisted; compared with baseline, the aromatherapy group had an 8.7% improvement and the placebo group had a 7.1% improvement. No statistics were run, which is appropriate since the n was so small (n = 7 per group).

This study is limited by its small size and the fact that 99% of the subjects were women. Another limitation was that the subjects were self-diagnosed, and that burnout was mild. The study was well blinded in that subjects could not discern the odors. Compliance was not very good for all subjects (although the percentage of compliance was not reported). Some subjects reported that it was helpful to take a breathing break, which in itself could have provided some benefit. This aspect needs to be controlled for in future studies. Another subject reported concern with colleagues seeing her use an inhaler throughout the day. The findings from this pilot study will be helpful to guide future, better-designed studies. Inhaling a mixture of peppermint, basil, and helichrysum essential oils several times a day appears to reduce the symptoms of moderate mental exhaustion and/or burnout.

—Heather S. Oliff, PhD

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