

Follow Your Nose for Rest

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Consider the following: fresh ground coffee, a baby's head, bacon, fresh baked cookies, old leather.

Did you experience any thoughts or feelings about this list? Did anything make you smile? Did anything make you frown? Our sense of smell is often forgotten, but it is one of the most important ways that we interact with the environment. It is a primitive sense attached to a deeper part of the brain and is tied very closely to memory, emotions, and behavior. Smells are processed directly in the limbic system providing instant motivation for behavior. Smells elicit certain responses without involving the cerebral cortex.

This opens many possibilities for using smells with people living with dementia. A good place to start is using smell to promote rest and sleep. Many studies have been conducted about the use of aromatherapy to help people living with dementia to fall asleep faster, stay asleep longer, and move into a calm state. Although study results have been mixed, some individuals have experienced excellent results from incorporating aromatherapy into their daily routines.

Traditional aromatherapy involves using essential oils to help balance the mind, body, and spirit. These can be used with a diffuser, placed on a towel near the bed, or dissolved into a lotion to be used for massage. Aromatherapy oils that can help relieve stress and promote sleep include lavender, lemon balm, bergamot, ylang ylang, clary sage, and jasmine, along with blends of various oils. The most important consideration is personal preference; the oil needs to be pleasant to the individual.

Essential oils are not the only types of smell that can be effective. Any scent that brings a peaceful, calming emotion can work. Think back to smells that were important for an individual. Certain flowers, a perfume or cologne, food smells, or a pet can be beneficial. For myself, there is nothing better than the smell of sheets fresh off an outdoor clothesline. It brings back great childhood memories and I feel comforted and safe whenever I snuggle into them.

Aromas can be incorporated as part of a calming routine prior to a nap or bedtime. One example of a routine is to dim lights and decrease the amount and volume of sounds. Massage the hands with firm pressure using a scented cream or oil. Place a towel with a few drops of lavender or other favorite oil near the pillow. Soft music can also help this transition. As always, there are a few considerations for safety. Aromatherapy is a complementary therapy and is not meant to replace medical treatment. If using oils for massage, ensure they are diluted per instructions on the bottle and discontinue if a skin rash appears. Always use caution if you choose to get your scents from candles. It is all about a pleasant experience.

The true joy of using scents is that the effects are not limited to the person living with dementia. Care partners can also use scents to help themselves when they feel stressed or need to wind down to sleep. It is one small way to add some extra self-care into the day. A few deep breaths to enjoy the scent of a favorite oil, fresh ground coffee, or peppermint tea can leave you feeling calmer and ready to rest yourself.