

# GRACE NOTES VII

**DR SALMA SIDDIQUE** considers the significance of fragrance in the therapy room.

**P**ERFUME IN THE 21st century is a five-billion-dollar plus industry. Thanks to technology and marketing we have more than 1,160 fragrances offering irresistible qualities in aesthetically pleasing containers. As a schoolgirl, I remember the significance of deodorant and fragrance 'as tools of attraction' or 'weapons of survival', dampening down body odours while avoiding post-gym communal showers. Our western culture is a deodorised, sweet-smelling culture. The choice of fragrance can communicate sexuality, gender, class, belief, status, age and other social identifiers as well as obsessive or fetish practice in the everyday life of grooming. Disciplines such as anthropology, historical analysis, psychology and complementary and alternative medicine understand the body as physical, symbolic, imagined or found within particular historical times. Different cultural groups have developed diagnostics and treatments through levels of awareness and knowledge of the body which can register even the most subtle changes that may result in disease, illness and changes within the emotional state. Berne (1963) himself investigated the changes in the emotional state through a four-dimensional process integrating behavioural, historical, operational (social) and phenomenological information to reach a diagnosis.

I would suggest that within western contemporary society, from the mid-1980s, science and capitalism have split smells into good and bad from the individual to the social body in the forms of neuroscience and physiology. It uses the environment of fragrance as a sanitizer and an indulgence. In recent years even our environments have received a sensory makeover through odour-enhanced entertainment, effulgence pets, slow releasing olfactory products for the house and sensuous gardens. This could mirror one of Kahler's (1978) beliefs in the Drama Triangle 'I believe I can make you feel good emotionally' which is the Rescuer/Victim interaction. I wonder if there is a connection between masking our natural smells and odours and the dulling of our senses and perception about our own wellbeing, interpersonal relationships and our place in the natural environment?

As an anthropologist, I can recognise the weaving of an anthropological thread in the work of Levi-Strauss

(1955) on mythology and spirituality with the exploration of myths operating as sacred stories transmitted from one generation to the next. There are similarities with the myths and fairytales described by Berne (1975) some of which deal with the presenting façade being a cover up for the real thing for example, Beauty and the Beast. Myths and stories have become embedded in religious rituals and practices and can help maintain wellbeing, protection, purification and the restoration of the body's own healing energies across different cultures.

In childhood I can recall the regular use of myrrh oil as part of the Ayurvedic medicine administered by my mother at home. She often massaged an upset stomach to relieve anxiety and aches. When I lay stretched out in front of the warm fire and wriggled under my mother's cold oily hands on my stomach or limbs she would call out in annoyance to me and my siblings of how the Egyptians used myrrh oil to embalm mummies and naughty children: so if I didn't stop my nuisance she threatened to phone the camel train to come and get me. Over the years I have learned about the extensive range of fragrances out there so I am pretty astounded to have got through my life with just my myrrh oil!

My experiences from the therapy room are of clients recalling the nostalgic or traumatic memory which can result in the boundaries between cognitive, physiology and perceptions becoming blurred when the narrative evoked memories of smells. The practice of bringing smells into awareness by recounting or for example, through the burning of essential oils can enhance psychological processing through making the material conscious. However, smells and odours are based around an individual experience, perception, cultural belief and choice. We need to introduce them into the therapy room with great care. As therapists we might consider the importance of fragrance to our work: not to be sniffed at but inhaled through our most heartfelt breaths.

## References

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