

Aromatherapy and Its Role in Holistic Oncology Care

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INTRODUCTION

When I began my Level 3 studies, I felt a strong pull toward holistic oncology, not out of mere curiosity, but from a deep, longstanding interest in understanding cancer and the many ways we can support the body through it. Even in my teenage years, I was already mindful of the choices I made, striving to build healthy habits and live in a way that nurtured my long-term well-being. This early awareness naturally evolved into a desire to explore how complementary therapies, particularly aromatherapy, can play a meaningful role in supporting individuals navigating cancer.

Aromatherapy, the therapeutic use of essential oils extracted from plants, has gained increasing recognition as a supportive modality within holistic oncology care. While it is not a cure for cancer, it offers valuable benefits in improving quality of life, managing symptoms, and providing emotional and psychological support to patients undergoing treatment (National Cancer Institute) [1] (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Essential Oils Extracted from Plants

Cancer and its conventional treatments, such as chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery, can often bring a wide range of side effects, including nausea, fatigue, pain, anxiety, and sleep disturbances. Aromatherapy has been shown to help alleviate many of these symptoms when used safely and appropriately. Essential oils such as ginger and peppermint are commonly used to help reduce nausea, while lavender

and Roman chamomile are known for their calming effects, supporting relaxation and improved sleep (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health). [2]. Additionally, systematic reviews suggest that aromatherapy massage may contribute to short-term relief of anxiety and improve overall well-being in cancer patients [3,4].

A fundamental principle in holistic oncology is the understanding that cancer does not affect a single organ or system in isolation, but rather impacts the entire person physically, emotionally, and psychologically. This perspective emphasizes treating the body as a whole, integrating not only medical interventions but also supportive lifestyle practices. Nutrition plays a critical role, as a well-balanced, nutrient-dense diet can help support immune function, maintain strength, and improve overall resilience during treatment. Likewise, lifestyle factors such as stress management, sleep quality, and physical activity are essential components of care, as they influence both physiological and emotional well-being. Complementary therapies like aromatherapy fit

within this framework by addressing symptom relief while also supporting mental and emotional health. This integrative approach, which combines conventional treatment with evidence-informed supportive care, is increasingly recognized as a key element in improving quality of life for individuals with cancer [1].

CASE 1

It was August of 2023 when I met Peter* (not his real name), at that time he's already been diagnosed of having Astrocytoma WHO Grade 4, which is an aggressive type of brain tumor, from his biopsy as of Feb 2022 and has already had craniotomy (Figure 2).

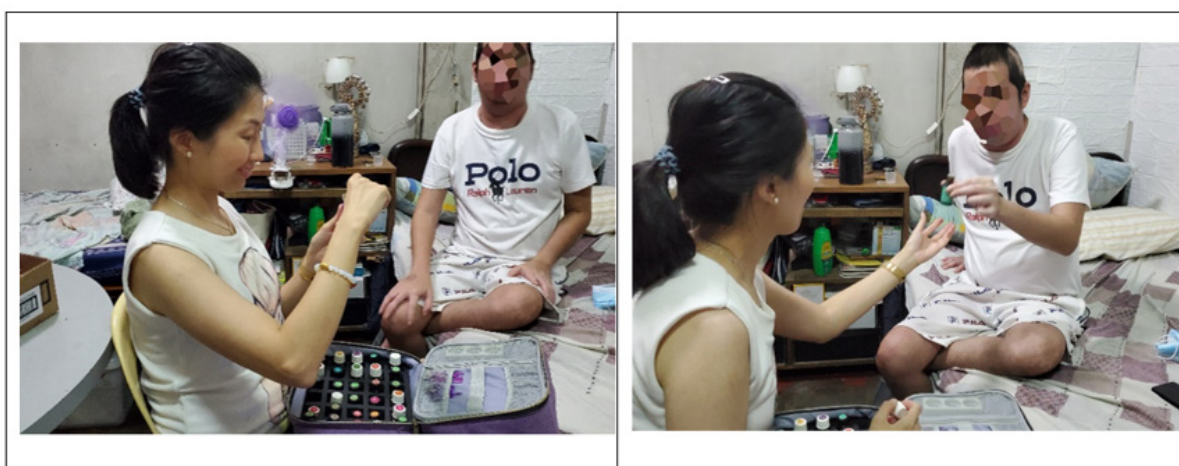


Figure 2: Peter*(+), 37m, Astrocytoma WHO Grade 4

During our conversation, he talked about feelings of depression, nausea, and blurred eyesight. He mentioned having seizures and weakness on his right leg. He also shared his difficulty in getting ample sleep. With that, I supported him by making an uplifting inhaler blend for his mornings using Cornmint (*Mentha canadensis L.*), Bergamot (*Citrus bergamia*), Lime (*Citrus Aurantifolia*), and Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*) as his pick-me-upper whenever he's feeling bouts of depression. We carefully picked the essential oils together, making sure that the scent is something that's within his preference. I also made him a topical roller blend for his surgery spot using Sandalwood (*Santalum album*), Orange (*Citrus sinensis*), Grapefruit (*Citrus paradisi*), Lime (*Citrus Aurantifolia*), and Blue Tansy (*Tanacetum annuum*). For the next coming weeks, he was really happy with the inhaler that I prepared for him and was really having better mood. His appetite was better and had a really positive outlook whenever I would check on him. Peter's only wish is to be able to celebrate his birthday in December. Unfortunately, he passed in October of that year.

Beyond physical symptom management, aromatherapy plays a crucial role in emotional and psychological care. A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, often accompanied by fear, uncertainty, and emotional distress. The olfactory system has a direct connection to the limbic system, which regulates emotions and memory, allowing essential oils to influence mood and emotional states [5]. Gentle inhalation or diffusion of oils such as grapefruit, frankincense, bergamot, lavender, and cedarwood are often used to promote emotional balance, reduce stress, and create a sense of comfort during challenging times.

CASE 2

I first met Elsa*, a 44-year-old mother whom I first met in February 2023. She had undergone surgery for breast cancer in November 2022; however, a recurrence was identified just two months later, in January 2023. At the time of our initial consultation, she was actively undergoing radiation therapy. As part of a supportive care approach, I provided a gentle

hand massage aimed at promoting relaxation and circulation, using a low-dilution blend of essential oils including Grapefruit (*Citrus paradisi*), Bergamot FCF (*Citrus bergamia*), Sandalwood

(*Santalum album*), Palmarosa (*Cymbopogon martini*), Lemon (*Citrus limon*), and Copaiba (*Copaifera officinalis*) (Figure 3).

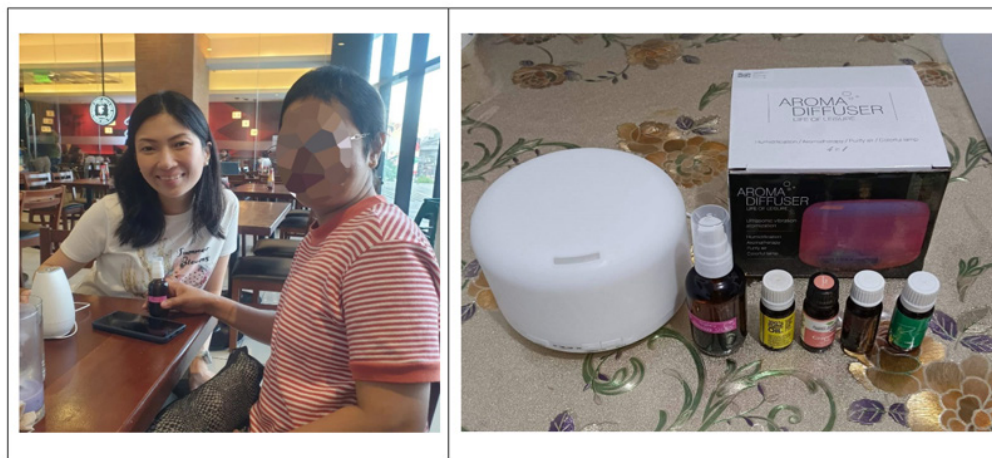


Figure 3: Elsa*(t), 44f, Stage 4 Breast Cancer

In addition, I provided her with a diffuser set with essential oils primarily composed of citrus oils. These were selected not only for their uplifting aroma and mood-enhancing effects but also due to the presence of d-limonene, a naturally occurring monoterpene found in citrus essential oils. Preclinical studies have demonstrated that d-limonene exhibits anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and potential anticancer properties, including the ability to modulate cellular signaling pathways, inhibit tumor cell proliferation, and induce apoptosis in certain cancer cell lines [6,7]. However, it is important to emphasize that such findings are largely based on in vitro and animal studies, and should not be interpreted as clinical treatment for cancer.

Throughout the course of our sessions, aromatherapy was used as a complementary modality to support emotional

well-being, reduce stress, and provide moments of comfort during her treatment journey. Evidence suggests that aromatherapy may help reduce anxiety and improve overall quality of life in patients undergoing cancer treatment [3,4]. Despite ongoing medical care and supportive interventions, her condition progressed, and within 11 months, her cancer metastasized. Elsa passed away in November 2023. Her case serves as a profound reminder of the complexity of cancer and the limitations of both conventional and complementary approaches, while also highlighting the meaningful role that holistic therapies can play in enhancing quality of life, providing comfort, and supporting patients with dignity and compassion throughout their journey (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Julie (t), 65f, Stage 4 Primary CNS B-Cell Lymphoma

2023 was a tough year for me as I never expected the Big-C would hit me very close to home. In August of that year, my mother began experiencing progressive weakness in her lower extremities, accompanied by episodes of imbalance and persistent tingling sensations in her limbs. Over the following months, her condition steadily declined, and by December, she had become completely immobile and dependent on a wheelchair.

In retrospect, my mother had been experiencing leg pain for some time, which we initially attributed to more common conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis. It was only when her symptoms progressed to severe weakness, debilitating pain, and loss of mobility that we sought more extensive medical evaluation. Her case highlights the often complex and nonspecific presentation of lymphoma, which can make early diagnosis challenging.

During this time, my sister and I provided supportive care at home, incorporating simple yet nurturing practices such as warm foot baths using a decoction of pomelo rind and ginger. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), these are warming ingredients intended to help improve circulation and provide warmth to her unusually cold feet, offering both physical comfort and emotional reassurance. However, despite these efforts, her symptoms persisted and worsened. After several weeks of hospital admissions and multiple imaging studies, she was formally diagnosed in January 2024 with Stage IV primary central nervous system (CNS) B-cell lymphoma, a rare, aggressive non-Hodgkin lymphoma that has spread within the brain, spinal cord, cerebrospinal fluid, or eyes [8] (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Medical Management of Julie

As part of her medical management, she was prescribed Paracetamol every four hours, with Tramadol administered for more severe pain episodes. While these medications provided necessary relief, I was concerned about the long-term effects of frequent analgesic use, particularly on organ function. In response, I developed a gentle aromatherapy massage blend using essential oils like Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Sweet Marjoram (*Origanum majorana*), Black Pepper (*Piper nigrum*), Plai (*Zingiber cassumunar*), Ginger CO2 (*Zingiber officinale*), and Sichuan Pepper CO2 (*Zanthoxylum schinifolium*) to provide warmth and relaxation during massage. This massage blend is intended to alleviate my mother's leg and arm pain

while providing comfort as a complementary measure. For approximately two to three weeks, this blend provided her with noticeable relief, and she frequently requested it as part of her care routine.

Touch therapies, combined with aromatherapy through gentle massage, also offers therapeutic benefits. When performed by trained professionals, oncology massage using properly diluted essential oils may help reduce pain, improve circulation, and provide meaningful human connection, which is an important yet often overlooked aspect of care [9]. However, these interventions must always be adapted to the individual's medical condition and treatment plan (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Aromatherapy Through Gentle Massage

However, as her condition progressed, her response to the blend changed. She began to experience a burning sensation in her legs and reported that the same application that once provided relief had become increasingly uncomfortable. This shift is consistent with the evolving symptom profile seen in advanced lymphoma. Patients may develop heightened skin sensitivity, neuropathic pain, and pruritus (itching), which can significantly alter their tolerance to touch and topical applications.

Lymphoma is known to cause intense itching, which is often more pronounced at night and may be accompanied by a burning sensation. This symptom is believed to be related to the body’s immune response to malignant cells. As the immune system reacts to lymphoma, it releases cytokines and other inflammatory mediators that can irritate nerve endings in the skin, leading to persistent pruritus and discomfort [10]. Such changes underscore the importance of continuously reassessing complementary interventions and adapting care approaches based on the patient’s evolving condition (Figure 7).

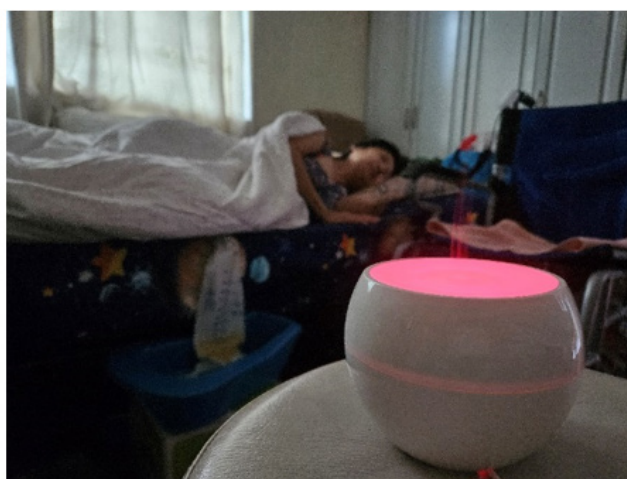


Figure 7: Adapting Care Approaches

This experience reinforced a critical principle in holistic oncology: interventions that are beneficial at one stage of illness may not remain appropriate as the disease progresses. It highlights the need for solid educational foundation, clinical awareness, and deep attentiveness to the patient’s changing physical and sensory responses. Above all, it emphasizes that the true role of holistic care is not to replace medical treatment,

but to provide compassionate, responsive support that honors a client-first approach that prioritizes their comfort, dignity, and lived experience throughout their journey.

Safety is paramount in holistic cancer care. Not all essential oils or methods of application are suitable for individuals undergoing cancer treatment. Factors such as immune status,

skin sensitivity, medications, and treatment protocols must be carefully considered. This highlights the importance of proper education and working within a multidisciplinary healthcare approach, ensuring that aromatherapy complements, and not replaces, medical treatment.

In essence, aromatherapy serves as a bridge between physical relief and emotional support. It empowers patients to actively participate in their own care, offering moments of comfort, relaxation, and control in what can often feel like an overwhelming journey. As research continues to grow, so does the recognition of aromatherapy as a valuable component of integrative oncology.

Through mindful and informed use, aromatherapy can bring not only relief but also a sense of wholeness, supporting the body, calming the mind, and nurturing the spirit in the face of cancer.

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