To Smell or Not to Smell (or don’t or can’t smell)

By Penny Keay

Oh, those wonderful scents and smells of essential oils.

Your nose can detect many different scents and remembers them in a lock and key part of your limbic (basic) brain.

What happens when you can’t or don’t smell anything? Can you benefit from essential oils? If you have lost your sense of smell, can you get it back using essential oils?

Why do I smell it out of the bottle and then when I first put it in the diffuser or bath but soon after I can’t smell the essential oils anymore?

These are some of the many questions we are asked on a regular basis about essential oils and the sense of smell.

When someone asks if they can’t smell whether it be an oil or general smelling, we have to ask if they know when it was that they couldn’t smell anything.

If they explain, they can smell an essential oil when it is fresh from the bottle or first put into a bath or other diffuser but soon afterwards cannot they want to know what is happening.

We explain that your body has set in motion a mechanism that actually blocks out that scent.

The term “olfactory fatigue” is used to describe this phenomenon of the sense of smell. Some aroma therapists use other terms to explain this phenomenon but it still is the same thing. It is a protection and safety mechanism.

You can read more about this subject in a previous article Olfactory Fatigue – What is it? How it affects the use of Essential oils & Why don’t the Scents Last? or The Smell is gone, what happened?

This olfactory block can happen in as few as 10 to 15 minutes in some folks.

If you think you may be experiencing olfactory fatigue, simply leaving the area for several minutes and then returning will often ‘reset’ the sense of smell and you will again smell the scent. Mind you, it will only last for a few minutes before your sense of smell is once again blocked by your own brain.

Just because you cannot smell the oils in the room doesn’t mean they aren’t there. They are and are working for you. It is not necessary to add more oils to your diffuser.

You will not benefit from using more. In fact you could add too much to the air and make yourself feel sick (nauseated) or possibly even develop a headache.

These are two of the most common signs you have diffused too much essential oils into the room.
All you need to do is simply open the windows and let some fresh air in, while you take a walk outdoors!

**What if someone REALY can't smell?**

Now if someone says that they really can’t smell, we have to ask – Did you have some sort of injury to your nose and nasal passage?

Were you able to smell prior and do you remember when the last time you were able to smell?

Are you on medications? Do you suffer from allergies? Have you recently been ill or had surgery?

Depending on the injury to the nose, you may or may not be able to regain your sense of smell. Common sense tells you if the specialized olfactory nerve sensors were damaged or destroyed you will most likely never be able to smell again.

If you can recall some type of illness or emotional trauma and prior to that you could smell but it seems that over-night you could no longer smell – it is possible your brain is blocking your sensory pathway.  It is possible you could be able to unlock this obstacle to your sense of smell.

One method to try is to start testing with several essential oils to see if your sense of smell can detect any of the oils.

You would want to try strong sweet smelling.  In addition, a strong bitter or pungent odors.

Alternating every few seconds between the two to see if by chance you might be able to trick the body to unlock the block it has created.

If you find one or two oils that can be smelled, slowly try other oils similar to the ones you can smell. Gradually you may be able to reset your sense of smell.

If your loss of smell is due to allergies, colds or other inflammatory processes involving the nasal passages, once you get the inflammation under control your sense of smell should return shortly thereafter.

In fact, there are several essential oils that are helpful with inflammation i.e. Roman Chamomile, German Chamomile and for temporary relief from congestion; decongesting essential oils like Eucalyptus globulus or Peppermint among others are beneficial.

After surgery (or various types of anesthesia) and using any variety of medications can cause a temporary loss of smell too.

Be patient and your sense of smell should return once you have recovered from anesthesia and are off the meds.

**Can you benefit from essential oils if you cannot smell them? Yes you can!!**

Remember essential oils are made of tiny molecules of various chemical constituents.
Even if you can’t smell them, when you do inhale, they transfer through your respiratory system and enter the blood stream just like breathing in any air.

The molecules of the essential oils then travel through your blood to various parts of your body, fighting infections, relieving inflammation and much more.

Not only can they benefit you when you are plagued with physical illness and ailments, they can also help to lift your spirits emotionally.

Often times unhappiness, sadness, and depression are results of chemical imbalances set off by an emotional response to something unpleasant. Using essential oils known to be uplifting can work even if you can’t smell such as Grapefruit or Peppermint.

And there are essential oils to help you feel rested and fall asleep (sedative and calming oils like Lavender and Roman Chamomile).

Then again, you need not smell to be able to benefit from them. They are quickly absorbed into your body while being diffused into the air and the molecules are used to be able to help you drift easily to sleep.

And again, used in massage, the oils that can produce a warm, deep penetrating heat can help to loosen up all those tight and sore muscles.

Even in folks with dementia and other disease processes that you are not sure if they can smell, diffusing a little essential oil around them can and often does produce some sort of response.

So whether you can smell or not, do not shy away from natures little gifts. As the benefits are still available to you as long as you are alive and breathing!!