



# Aromatherapy

## AGENDA

*Communities from Burma (Myanmar) explore the benefits of aromatherapy for their health and wellbeing in a course. Lynne Malcolm writes.*



**C**ommunities from Burma (Myanmar) have experienced numerous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, as have many populations across the world, such as job loss, financial hardship, social isolation and high levels of anxiety. But in Myanmar this is also against a backdrop of political instability involving repressive military rule, economic policies causing poverty and civil war against ethnic minorities. In February 2021 the military executed a coup against the civilian authority, announced a year-long state of emergency and arrested opposition figures and civil activists.

To address some of the difficulties experienced by communities from Burma and Malaysia during the pandemic, STARTTS in partnership with the Community Migrant Resource Centre (CRMC), delivered a training course in the use and techniques of aromatherapy.

The taster course introduces aromatherapy to the communities to help with their recovery from trauma and to aid wellbeing. It aims to give community members new skills, knowledge and information on pain relief, relaxation techniques and to help with sleeping and breathing issues. The idea was that participants could use these skills for their own therapy, as well as passing them on to family members. A further hope is that the course will help participants gain self-confidence, provide skills for employment purposes and even start their own businesses.

The course was led by Dr Thuy Tran PhD, herself a refugee from Vietnam, who works at STARTTS. She has extensive experience and qualifications in counselling, and the use of Traditional Chinese Medicine and complementary therapies in the treatment and support of refugees.

STARTTS uses complementary therapies along with counselling to help people with experiences of torture and refugee trauma, who often suffer from pain, discomfort and physical injuries. This multi-modal approach is used because traumatic memories are often unconscious, and so may be more easily accessed through body focused treatments and supporting a healthy lifestyle. It's also sometimes more culturally appropriate for clients to focus on bodily sensations rather than talking therapy, which may be too confronting.

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**T**of complementary medicine in treating the symptoms of physical and mental disorders in Western populations, although the evidence base for the efficacy of aromatherapy in treating some conditions remains low through a lack of rigorous studies. However, there are also promising results that suggest further lines of research into the aromatherapy treatment of anxiety, depression and symptoms of stress are warranted.

Examples of promising research include a pilot study by Conrad and Adams on the effectiveness of aromatherapy to improve anxiety and depression in high-risk postpartum woman in Indianapolis. It shows that aromatherapy is a positive complementary therapy for anxiety and depression. Similarly, a systematic review of literature conducted by Boehm et al., in 2012, on the benefits and safety of treatments for people with cancer found that aromatherapy helps with anxiety, depression and the loss of wellbeing on a short-term basis, supporting symptomatic relief, improvement of pain management, sleep and reduction of anxiety and depression scores

Another literature review by Stea et al., in 2014 on the effectiveness of aromatherapy in treating anxiety, insomnia, pain and nausea for surgical patients shows that some essential oils such as lavender, orange and peppermint help with anxiety and nausea, but no conclusive results were obtained for pain management.

Overall, these studies show that aromatherapy has been widely used in different health settings as a complementary therapy, especially to support mental health and wellbeing.

The aromatherapy taster course team included leader Dr Tran, facilitators Victor Saw, Aung Htut, a caseworker and community worker from CMRC, and from STARTTS Burmese Group worker Mee Squee, community development officer Gary Cachia, who supported the Zoom and project issues, and Daniel Zu, volunteer interpreter from the Karen community.

Mee Squee, a wellness worker for the communities from Burma community, first heard about aromatherapy during the COVID lockdown when they were doing a session with youth, and thought it would be very beneficial for the communities from Burma at this time because so many people were very anxious about events in Myanmar. There was also so much uncertainty for them surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community members, while unaware of the term aromatherapy, readily understood the concept of using simple oils and aromas to improve health and wellbeing.

Dr Tran has discovered that during troubled times in Myanmar over the past 70 years, many people survived deep in the forest, relying on nature and meditation. So when Dr Tran and the team started to discuss aromatherapy, it reminded the members of the communities from Burma

of their deep knowledge of the value of forest herbal resources. Most of the community can't read or write even in their own language, but hearing about aromatherapy reminded them the way they saw grandparents use particular plants for healing, so the concept of aromatherapy resounded with their cultural background and was therefore engaging to them.

The course was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 was open to all members of communities from Burma in Sydney and was delivered via Zoom between October 16 and November 20, 2020. The six-week taster course focused on the benefits of aromatherapy and engaging participants' interest in further study, and was divided into three weekly sessions of theory and three practical sessions. For the practical sessions, participants were asked to choose a family member with whom they could practice techniques and apply knowledge during the first three weeks.

In Phase 2 course participants were also recruited in Sydney, while some who had taken part in Phase 1 also asked to join the second phase. A few people from Myanmar heard about the course from family and friends in Sydney and asked to join, so that of the 37 participants, 33 women and four men (65 per cent) lived in Sydney, 27 per cent were from Myanmar and 8 per cent from Malaysia. Some participants self-identified with ethnic communities such as Karen, Kachin, Rakhine and Mon, some identified simply as Burmese.

Phase 2 was tailored more to the needs of clients during COVID, plus any symptoms they were experiencing since the coup in Myanmar. The course comprised 10 weekly sessions run between July 23 and September 24, 2021, and was supported by a Karen and a Burmese interpreter.

Some of the essential oils used in the course were blended by Dr Tran and included oils such as basil, peppermint, Australian eucalyptus oil and lemongrass.

It was taught that certain oils have calming and pain-relieving effects, and others such as basil and peppermint have uplifting and energising effects. They were encouraged to use the oils to massage and bathe themselves and their family members, add small amounts of certain oils to drinking water and to burn essential oils to create fragrances in the house. Their homework was to try all these things and report back on the effects, including sending photos of how their family was reacting to the techniques.

Dr Tran was pleased that participants were enjoying experimenting with the oils and would enthusiastically ask her about what the next homework was. Dr Tran said it was wonderful to see some of the homework photos of children's delighted faces as they had their feet massaged

with essential oils.

Mee Squee described one participant whose daughter had a brain tumour and was paralysed from the neck down. This mother asked if she could return for Phase 2 of the course because she had found that massaging her daughter's legs with essential oils really helped to settle her down. As she continued to use lemongrass and peppermint to soak her daughter's legs, her daughter became calmer and this further empowered the mother in helping her daughter, so she and the rest of the family felt less stressed and exhausted.

There was also a man of Karen background who came to Australia as a refugee who was having trouble sleeping and had pain and body aches most of the time. He began using aromatherapy oils to massage himself and felt that it had helped him. Anecdotally it was reported that overall the participants liked the course, and were grateful and appreciative of the facilitators for delivering it.

As a more formal way of assessing the course, STARTTS has completed a comprehensive evaluation of Aromatherapy Taster Course Phase 2 to find the outcomes for the Burmese community, in the hope of improving the course and supporting similar future initiatives.

The evaluation drew on workshops with participants, their weekly homework and feedback, an in-depth interview with the STARTTS Community worker, a review of academic papers and the group's demographic data.

Participants were also given a questionnaire before and after the course, the World Health Organisation Well-Being Index (WHO-5) – a short, self-administered questionnaire used to evaluate quality of life and wellbeing.

It was found from the data analysed that the aromatherapy taster course has met most of its objectives. Participants have increased their knowledge and understanding of aromatherapy, and have incorporated what they have learnt in their everyday practices to support their wellbeing. Although the qualitative data does not show much evidence regarding sleep improvement, the WHO-5 score indicates an overall improvement in sleep and reduction of stress levels.

**W**hen participants were asked to comment on what improvements could be made for future courses, they suggested that they could be delivered face-to-face at a convenient time to everyone, so they could see and practise what they learn with the direct support of the teacher. They would also like more similar courses with extra topics and information on the benefits of aromatherapy and how to use it.

During the course, participants were also presented with some challenges. The pandemic lockdowns put









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everyone under pressure, including the course delivery team who were also working from home and dealing with their own childcare issues. Participants were often affected by limited access to technology and the internet. Also, the internal armed conflict in Myanmar hampered some of the participants there being actively involved in all sessions. However, the course delivery team were very resourceful and able to provide recordings of sessions for participants who were not able to attend the live sessions.

Apart from the positive outcomes shown in the evaluation report of the taster course, there were more broad benefits to communities from Burma. Dr Tran noted that not only did the 37 Sydney participants benefit from the course, but also in many of those homes they would often have seven or eight more family from different generations all sitting together in front of the computer, participating. Even the elders in their 70s and 80s enjoyed learning about the benefits of aromatherapy.

Another important side benefit of the course, says Dr Tran, was that many people from different ethnic groups became engaged with each other as part of the communities from Burma and are now more engaged and connected with the STARTTS community.

The team hopes to organise a face-to-face social get-together for all the participants who can make it, to strengthen their connection to each other and hope that they can run more courses like this over the next couple of years. ☸