

podcast 5

Hello and welcome to this week's Pockets of Pleasure.

We're now a full week into the Self Compassion advent calendar - did you print out your own copy or have you been following along on instagram? If so, how're you getting on? Are you being a little kinder to yourself? I hope so!

Last week we had a mini exploration of sound and how we can find pockets of pleasure not just in music, but in the everyday sounds of our lives.

This week we're going to be sniffing around one of my favourite senses - smell!

As an aromatherapist smell is obviously very important to me, and it's a topic I'm very passionate about, so it will come up in multiple episodes I'm sure. I can go into full scale geek mode about the science of aroma, but I'll try to hold myself back and make this an introduction, rather like last week was for sound.

It could be argued that all of our senses are equally important but I truly believe that smell is the sense that is most crucial to our survival. Let me just read you this quote from Diane Ackerman's A Natural History of the Senses so you can begin to get a feel for why I believe this:

„We see only when there is light enough, taste only when we put things into our mouths, touch only when we make contact with someone or something, hear only sounds that are loud enough. But we smell always and with every breath. Cover your eyes and you will stop seeing, cover your ears and you will stop hearing, but if you cover your nose and try to stop smelling, you will die.“

Now the pedant in me wants to tell you that this isn't exactly true as, when we sleep, our sense of smell ‚goes offline‘ which is why smoke detectors are so important - but never the less, that quote does impress upon us the importance of our sense of smell.

With so many people experiencing the misery of the loss of their sense of smell and taste, I'm really hoping that scent hygiene and training become hot topics, because smell is such an important sense but in our modern lives it gets very badly abused, much to our detriment. More on that later.

Of all the senses, our sense of smell is the one that creates the most evocative memories. Because of our biology, aromas can act as an instantaneous time machine - you might get a waft of a certain smell and suddenly you're back in your granny's kitchen.

This is because scent molecules have more or less direct access to the memory making and recalling part of our brain.

The olfactory bulb (our scent processor) sits right next to our hippocampus - that part of our brain that is responsible for creating long term emotional memories. Because of the thinness of the barrier between the top of our nose and our brain, smells have a head start when it comes to memory association, particularly when they're attached to a strong emotion. (This is also why inhalation is the most effective way of using essential oils as the active compounds they contain get direct access to the blood stream.)

Because of this, smells can often be a bigger trigger for PTSD than noises.

In aromatherapy the science shows that certain aromas, for instance lavender, have particular physiological effects as well as psychological ones. It's generally agreed that lavender is a calming aroma which can help people to relax and drift off to sleep - I use it in my Sweet Dreams blend for this reason. However, if your brain has associated the smell of lavender with a negatively charged emotional experience, then using lavender is going to have the opposite effect on you. For this reason we need to be careful when using scents in public spaces - there's a growing trend for schools and workplaces to pump certain smells into the air to elicit desired states of behaviour, but it's much better and more effective, to create more personalised scent scapes that can be used by each individual at the point at which it feels most needed.

What's so great about this scent memory connection is that it's a pretty simple way to create a range of smell anchors - if you remember we talked about anchors in episode three. But to recap - anchors are a way of shortcutting certain emotional states by using self created triggers.

In last weeks episode I talked about how my eldest children associated the sound of Enya with sleep. We can do this with scent too.

We'll be looking more deeply at the role of personal rituals in a future episode, but I want to briefly touch on them now.

We can use scent memory to evoke any feeling we want - believe it or not there is an entire arm of marketing dedicated to doing just that, and in my opinion it's pretty bloody manipulative! But that's a rant I'm not going to get into today!

On the sales page for my self compassion blend I say:

I'm inviting you to use the power of scent memory to help create new, more loving and compassionate thoughts about yourself.

This alludes to this creation of anchors through simple scent based personal rituals.

One of the areas that so many of us struggle with these days is sleep. Me and insomnia, like anxiety, have a very long acquaintance which is why it was so important to me to create a sleep blend - everything I do in my business has come out of a personal need!

There are lots of factors at play when it comes to insomnia from physical things like room temperature and the comfort levels of your bedding, to over exposure to blue light in the hour before you go to bed, an over active mind, stress, anxiety, your sense of safety and so much more.

One easy thing we can do to help is to create winding down to sleep anchors with scent. We can incorporate other things too but starting with scent is a nice easy, relatively inexpensive place to start.

And we can make it a pocket of pleasure to boot!

Now of course I'm going to recommend my Sweet Dreams blend, but you can of course use any scent that you find relaxing.

There are several ways you can create your scent sleep anchor, but what's most important is the consistency of your behaviour around it.

As an example:

As you begin your night time routine you might add a few drops of a relaxing oil blend to a diffuser. Once it's become a nightly habit your brain will associate the smell with the act of getting ready for bed.

Once you're in bed you might use a sleep balm or rollerball on your wrists, taking pleasure in applying the product to your skin.

You might then bring your wrists up to your nose and take a deep inhale of the scent before

lying down.

If skin products aren't for you, you could simply inhale the aroma direct from a bottle of essential oil.

You might use a pillow mist or an old school lavender sachet so that when your head hits the pillow you're enveloped in that soothing scent.

You could use one, a couple or all of these things to help create that association between scent and sleep. As I said, it's the consistency that will help to fast track this, so pick the thing that you know you'll be able to firstly enjoy doing the most, and secondly stick to with ease.

It's time for a quick break now, why not use it to have a think about which of those ideas would work best for you.

When we come back I'm going to talk a little bit about synthetic scents, anosmia and why we might really want to 'wake up and smell the coffee'.

MUSIC

Welcome back!

So now you understand a bit about how scent works, and how you can use it to help you sleep, we're going to dive a bit deeper into why, if we want to live as healthy a life as possible, Retraining our noses is as important as retraining our tastebuds, and why weaning ourselves off the alluring pull of synthetic scents is so important.

If we think back to the Diane Ackerman quote at the beginning of this episode, it's clear that, with every breath we take (sorry if, like me, you now have a Police earworm - video in the show notes to make sense of this reference if you've no idea what I'm on about!)

Eh hem... so, every time we take a breath we're inhaling scent molecules. We already know that they have easy access to our brain and our blood stream, but they also have a direct route to our lungs via the respiratory system.

Maybe because of how much work our olfactory system is doing, our noses can quite quickly become acclimatised to smells that we're surrounded by. You'll stop smelling your own perfume, or, if you use plugin air fresheners or such like, you'll stop noticing those too. You become acclimatised to your surroundings scentscape.

It doesn't mean you're not still inhaling those molecules, it just means your sensory system has given itself the space to detect new smells. It strikes me that this is probably a protective mechanism forged through all the years of human evolution - friendly, safe scents will fade into the background so that potentially dangerous aromas alert our senses to a threat.

As with so many aspects of our modern lives, our bodies haven't caught up with the speed of the technology we've created, and this can cause us lots of problems.

The trend for beautifully scented homes and bodies is a case in point.

Synthetic fragrances are notoriously bad for us - I'll link to an article in the shownotes which goes into many of the ways they can harm us - and whilst we might find pleasure in some of them (hello Lynx effect) the long term impacts are not to be sniffed at....

Replacing synthetic fragrances with natural ones is a great start, but we need to treat all scents with respect and use them in moderation. You might be surprised to learn that most aromatherapists don't diffuse essential oils on a daily basis because they understand that whilst they are natural compounds, they are, none the less, powerful chemicals. Anyone who tells you essential oils are chemical free is talking nonsense - I'll link to my blog post about this in the show notes.

As I said earlier, scent is an incredibly powerful memory maker - it can transport you back multiple decades in a fraction of a second. The loss of our sense of smell is a devastating blow to our human experience, not least because it impacts our sense of taste so heavily. Anosmia (the loss of smell) in later life is often a precursor to dementia, so it makes sense to do what you can to protect your olfactory system as much as possible now.

Avoid the allure of the chemically scented home, and instead learn to appreciate the more delicate, natural aromas. Be sparing with your use of scent, consider its impact on you and those around you. Do you really want to use laundry detergents and fabric softeners that promise 12 weeks of 'freshness'?

Natural perfumes evaporate quickly, which can be frustrating when you're used to the staying power of chemical fragrances, but consider that a benefit - you get to reexperience the delights every time you apply it, whilst keeping your delicate nasal mucosa intact, and with luck your time machine will last you long into old age!

All of this may have you wondering 'but where's the pleasure here?' So let's address that...

Reeducating your nose can be immensely pleasurable - take the time to smell everything! Well... maybe not EVERYTHING!!! But do take time to stop and smell the roses (although many commercially grown roses aren't fragrant, sadly). Smell your food - can you pick out any of the ingredients? Smell different essential oils, notice which ones you like, love or loath. Notice whether your scent preferences change depending on your mood or where you are in your cycle. I'm going to give you a blast of tough love here.... are you ready?

Stop being lazy with your scent pleasures! Those synthetic smells are designed to draw you in without much effort on your part! Start the process of appreciation of the more delicate scents, become more discerning, your body will thank you and your senses will be delighted that you've given them the opportunity to show you what they're truly made of!

And remember to use (natural) scents strategically to enhance whatever state of mind you want to create.

Top tip: any time you want to give your nose a reset - take a sniff of some freshly ground coffee - then see if you're able to notice more scents in your environment.

Right then, break time and then it's time for this week's pocket challenge!

MUSIC

Welcome back - let's get straight into this week's pocket challenge

If you're still using the daily alarms to stop and notice what your senses are picking up, then this week I want you to pay special attention to what you can smell.

If you're not using the alarms, then just bring your awareness to what your nose is experiencing as often as you can.

See how many different aromas you can detect around you, whether they're pleasant, neutral or down right obnoxious! See if you can differentiate between natural and synthetic scents and, if you want to, see if you can notice what impact these smells have on you physically and mentally.

Pay particular attention to the smells that make you feel good and ponder what it is about those scents that have this effect on you - are there any memories associated with them?

If you get the opportunity to ,stop and smell the roses, so to speak, do! Allow yourself those moments of scent experience and contemplation, they're important for both your physical and mental health.

Cultivating your sense of smell will pay dividends in ways that will not only enhance your pleasure but could even save your life!

That's it for this week. Next week we're focusing on the sense that's intimately entangled with smell - taste.

Bye for now!