

# Plant essences: a leap of faith in healing

Somewhere in the borderland between herbal medicine and homoeopathy live the 'essences', part of a broad category known as energy medicine. These simple remedies, usually but not always made from plants, are thought to work through the emotions and the psyche to heal the physical body. But, in truth, no one knows exactly how they work, why they work, or even if their effect is genuine or all in the head. No plant essences have ever been tested or proven scientifically to treat or cure anything, and there are no data on whether they produce measurable biochemical changes in the body.

And yet, many patients and practitioners swear by them, making them one of those therapies that we have to take on faith alone. To many scientists, flower and other vibrational essences fall somewhere below aromatherapy, comfort-eating and shopping in terms of therapeutic value. Because of this, the likelihood that they will ever be properly researched is slim. This, in turn, makes it difficult to reconcile the often intuitive art of healing with essences with the increasing demands that alternative medicine should be able to justify itself through scientific research.

Dr Edward Bach (pronounced 'batch'), an English bacteriologist and homoeopath, is credited with the discovery, in the 1930s, of the healing properties of plants. He believed that chronic stress due to emotions such as anger, fear, grief, worry and resentment had a role to play in lowering resistance to disease. He noted that his patients were prone to all sorts of infections when such emotions prevailed, which affirmed his belief that a person's emotional outlook determined the duration and severity of their illness.

Within the last couple of decades, medical researchers have begun to substantiate the connection between negative emotions and a reduction in resistance to disease. The stress of emotional factors can disrupt neurological function, hormone levels and immune response. The study of these connections is the basis of the new field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI).

Bach also discovered that people with similar personality traits often had the same types of diseases (something which modern psychology has begun to acknowledge) and responded to the same remedy, while those with different personality traits required different remedies to cure the same disease.

At heart, Bach's philosophy works along the same lines as other constitutional therapies, like homoeopathy, with which he was so familiar, and older systems of healthcare such as Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine. Unfortunately, Bach kept none of his research papers, lectured infrequently and preferred to diagnose intuitively, so his method of ascribing various energies to particular plants remains a mystery.

Nevertheless, many practitioners report that specific and chronic illnesses—such as hayfever and asthma to ME and lupus—which don't respond to conventional treatment, do respond in varying degrees to flower remedies.

There is little scientific literature to support these claims. Much of the 'evidence' is anecdotal in the form of case studies (*Homeop Heritage*, 1992; 17: 105–6; *Homeop Heritage*, 1989; 14: 358–61; *Pos Health*, 1996; 11: 10–1). A few concern specific uses such as for childhood illnesses (*Health Homeop*,

1994; 6: 17–20) or menopausal symptoms (*Altern Med Diag*, 1995; 15: 52–4).

The Dr. Edward Bach Centre in Mount Vernon, Sotwell, Oxfordshire, has a large collection of case studies as a result of its practitioner training course. In one such case, an allergy sufferer was 'diagnosed' as an 'oak/centaury type', with a strong sense of duty and responsibility toward her husband, mother and life in general. After three weeks of treatment with oak, centaury and star of Bethlehem, she no longer felt guilty, but was much more relaxed and happy, and her allergy symptoms were nearly gone.

Recent research published in the September 2001 edition of the online *International Journal of Healing and Caring* suggests that flower essences can be useful for depression (<http://www.ijhc.org/Journal/0601articles/Cram-I-1.html>).

However, two other studies suggest that, while the Bach Flower Rescue Remedy appeared to ease anxiety, no specific action of this combination of five flower essences could be found (*J Anxiety Disord*, 2001; 15: 359–66; *Complement Ther Nurse Midwifery*, 2001; 7: 215–21). As holistic medicine is based on the individual, it is unlikely that the usual scientifically designed studies will ever truly reflect whether this, or any other alternative therapy, works.

Despite the lack of hard evidence, it is surprising how many people find flower remedies to be genuinely useful. As Dr Bach put it: "Let not the simplicity of this method deter you from its use" (*Weeks N, The Medical Discoveries of Edward Bach, Physician, Saffron Walden, Essex: CW Daniel, 1940*). Many have taken this advice to heart and, worldwide, many practitioners of various backgrounds 'prescribe' flower and other essences to patients. In Australia, there are over 16 hospitals that currently offer treatment with indigenous flower remedies (*Complement Ther Nurse Midwifery*, 1998; 4: 111–7).

Consumers should bear in mind, however, that flower essences are specific in what they can achieve. If the body is damaged, they will not cure or repair it. But they may have a genuine role in helping the healing process by balancing the emotions that either cause or are caused by illness.

Flower remedies can be taken by anyone, including babies and even animals. In general, flower essences seem to be best applied when emotional symptoms dominate or where they may be blocking the healing of physical symptoms. With no known interactions with conventional medicine, flower essences may be a good choice to complement conventional regimes.

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## A world of choice

Today, there are literally hundreds of different types of plant and vibrational essences. In addition to the 38 classical remedies of Dr Bach, there are 20 Master's Flower Essences made from fruit and vegetable blossoms, 38 Healing Herbs—organic, hand-made versions of Dr Bach's remedies, 72 Australian Bush Flower Essences, 102 Californian Essences, Alaskan Flower Essences, The Findhorn Flower Essences from Scotland, The Bailey Flower Essences from Yorkshire, Himalayan Essences and other, more general combinations of essences from any number of media-friendly healers and cottage industries.

In addition to plant essences, there are essences made from almost every natural substance there is. On the fringe of flower essence therapy, there are people all over the world making and using environmental, colour and light essences, gem and crystal essences, chakra essences, ocean essences and even animal essences.