



How to Start Smell Training

Four scents, three minutes, twice a day: a beginner's short workbook

by Dr. Jamie Knight · Olfactory Health

**BEFORE YOU BEGIN: A SMELL I MISS, OR ONE I MOST WANT TO KNOW
BETTER**

WHY THIS WORKS

The nose that rebuilds itself

The olfactory system is one of the few parts of the nervous system that renews itself throughout your whole life. The cells that detect smell are replaced, again and again, for as long as you live. A sense that can regenerate is a sense that can, often, be trained back, and a sense that can always be trained deeper. That is the biological fact this practice is built on.

Smell training is the structured way of working with that renewal. The method was tested by Thomas Hummel and colleagues at the Smell and Taste Clinic in Dresden: four scents, chosen to span four broad families of smell, visited twice a day for twelve weeks. In their trial, patients who trained improved significantly more than patients who did not. A later meta-analysis (a study of studies, thirteen of them) found the same pattern: regular training improves how well people detect, tell apart, and identify smells.

THE WHOLE PRACTICE, IN SIX WORDS

Smell it. Name it. Remember it.

Passive sniffing does very little. Attention is the active ingredient. Each session, you smell one scent at a time, put a word to whatever arrives, and reach for one memory or image it suggests. Naming engages the thinking brain; memory gives the scent something to attach to. Everything in this workbook is a way of doing those three things with more care.

AN HONEST WORD ON EXPECTATIONS

Training improves the odds of recovery. It does not promise it. Results depend on the cause of the smell loss, how long it has been gone, and factors no one can see in advance. Some people notice change in weeks; many notice it in months; starting sooner tends to help. What the practice reliably gives everyone is a daily, structured relationship with your own recovery, instead of waiting in the dark. That alone is worth three minutes, twice a day.

WHO THIS IS FOR

Anyone whose smell has faded or vanished, after a virus, an injury, or a slow change. It is also for anyone with a working nose who wants a richer one: the same practice trains attention and memory in a healthy sense.

THE COMMITMENT

Two short sessions a day, morning and evening, three to five minutes each, for twelve to sixteen weeks. Consistency matters more than duration. A short session done is worth far more than a long session skipped.

"You are not starting something experimental. You are joining a practice that runs from a Dresden clinic to kitchens all over the world."

Six steps, three minutes

- 1 **Settle.** Sit somewhere quiet with your four scents. Two slow breaths. Let the day's noise drop for a moment.
- 2 **Smell the first scent.** Hold it a couple of centimetres from your nose. Small, gentle sniffs for ten to twenty seconds. Short, soft sniffs carry odour to the receptors better than one big breath.
- 3 **Name it.** Put a word to whatever you detect. Any word. "Sharp." "Faint." "Nothing yet." Naming asks the higher brain to engage, and engagement is what encodes.
- 4 **Remember it.** Reach for one memory, image, colour, or place the scent suggests. If nothing comes, that is information too, and worth a note.
- 5 **Rest, then repeat.** Two or three ordinary breaths so the nose resets, then move to the next scent. Keep the same order every session; the fixed order is part of the training.
- 6 **Close with your journal.** A rating for each scent, one word for the session, one memory that stood out. One line is plenty. Page 6 shows you how.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON DURING EACH SNIFF

Do not strain to smell. Straining tightens everything and helps nothing; stay relaxed and curious. Attend to the very first instant of the sniff, which carries the most information. And if you detect nothing at all, picture the scent as vividly as you can while you sniff. Imagined smell and real smell share brain pathways, and the imagining keeps those pathways warm for the day the signal returns.

MAKE IT STICK

Keep the scents somewhere you cannot miss them: beside the coffee maker, on the bedside table. Pair the session with something you already do, such as before the first sip of coffee and before bed. Within two weeks it will feel like part of the day.

NEVER MISS TWICE

You are allowed to miss a day. Life happens. The useful rule is simply this: try not to miss two in a row. On a thin day, opening one jar and taking one slow breath counts as showing up.

MY TWO SESSION TIMES, AND WHAT I WILL ANCHOR EACH ONE TO

The foundational four

The classic training set is Lemon, Rose, Eucalyptus, and Clove. They are not a random four. Each sits in a different broad family of smell, so training across them exercises the system widely: bright, soft, cool, warm. Four corners of the world of smell. Essential oils in small jars, oils on blotting strips, or a purpose-made kit all work. Keep them together, and label the lids.



Lemon

THE BRIGHT CORNER · CITRUS

Quick, sharp, and immediate. Lemon arrives fast and fades fast, which makes it a good scent to practise catching in the first instant of a sniff.

WORDS TO REACH FOR · bright · zesty · clean · tart · sunny · sparkling · waxy rind

Memory seed: for most people, a kitchen. What about you?



Rose

THE SOFT CORNER · FLORAL

Layered and slow to reveal itself. Rose is woven through perfume, ceremony, grief, and celebration, so it tends to reach emotional memory quickly.

WORDS TO REACH FOR · soft · velvety · powdery · honeyed · dewy · old-fashioned · heady

Memory seed: for most people, a person. What about you?



Eucalyptus

THE COOL CORNER · WOODY, MEDICINAL

Cool and opening, felt in the airways as much as smelled. Even when detection is low, that cooling sensation gives you something real to attend to.

WORDS TO REACH FOR · cool · green · camphor · piney · spa · antiseptic · fresh air

Memory seed: for most people, being cared for while ill. What about you?



Clove

THE WARM CORNER · SPICY

Dense, dark, and lingering, the slowest scent of the set. Clove tends to evoke vivid, time-stamped memories: baking, winter holidays, mulled drinks.

WORDS TO REACH FOR · warm · pungent · rich · holiday · incense · numbing · baked

Memory seed: for most people, a kitchen in winter. What about you?

BEFORE YOUR FIRST SESSION: A BASELINE

Smell each of the four once, gently, and mark a number from 1 (nothing) to 5 (clear and full). Be honest; a low score now is simply the floor you are about to build up from. In three months, this line is how you will see how far you have come.

MY BASELINE · DATE AND A NUMBER FROM 1 TO 5 FOR EACH SCENT

Date

Lemon

Rose

Eucalyptus

Clove

Starting with scents you already have

You do not need to order anything to begin tonight. What the research keeps pointing to is that the regular, attentive practice matters more than the exact materials: the original trial used single pure odorants, most people at home use essential oils, and everyday scents from your own shelves can carry the same practice. Your kitchen already holds all four corners of the world of smell.

Two things to hold onto. Choose one scent from each corner, so the set stays wide. And keep each choice consistent: the same jar of the same coffee, session after session, so your nose is always returning to the same place.

CORNER	ALREADY IN MOST HOMES
Bright	Fresh lemon or orange peel · fresh mint leaves · a grapefruit, scored with a fingernail
Soft	Vanilla extract · dried lavender · a rose hand cream · a soap you love
Cool	Fresh rosemary · pine or fir needles · mint toothpaste · a menthol chest rub
Warm	Whole cloves · ground cinnamon · ground coffee · chai tea, dry from the bag

Put each one in its own small clean jar, label the lid, and keep the four together where you will see them. Dried spices and coffee fade; refresh them every week or two so the signal stays strong.

MY FOUR TRAINING SCENTS

My bright scent

My cool scent

My soft scent

My warm scent

A memory I already associate with one of them

Get a journal just for this

Before your first session, find a notebook and give it one job: this practice, nothing else. A dedicated journal does two things a notes app cannot. Writing by hand slows you to the pace at which faint impressions can be noticed and named. And a single book, filling slowly, becomes the record that shows you change you would never feel day to day.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Any notebook works. Helpful qualities: it lies flat while you write, it is small enough to live beside your scents, and it is cheap enough that you are not precious about it. Keep a pen with it. Date every entry. That is the whole setup.

WHAT TO RECORD, EACH SESSION

The date and time of day. A number from 1 (nothing) to 5 (clear and full) for each scent. One word for what arrived. One memory, image, or association, even a reached-for one. On full days, write more. On thin days, numbers alone are a complete entry.

Here is what an ordinary early entry might look like. Notice how little it takes.

Tuesday, Oct 6 · morning, with coffee

Lemon 2 · faint, more idea than smell. Word: almost.

Rose 1 · nothing yet. Pictured Gran's garden anyway, the one by the gate.

Eucalyptus 3 · cool, opens the nose. Word: swimming lessons.

Clove 2 · a warm edge right at the start, then gone.

Session felt: hopeful. First time lemon has been anything at all.

WHY THE LOW BAR MATTERS

An entry you can finish in ninety seconds is an entry you will still be making in week twelve. The journal is there to serve the practice, never the other way around.

PREFER NOT TO WRITE IN IT?

The next page is built to be cut out and taped straight into your journal: a weekly log and a monthly habit tracker. Photocopy or reprint it as many times as you like.

Pages for your journal

Cut along the dashed lines and tape these into your journal, or use them as the pattern to rule your own. Print this page again whenever you need a fresh week or a fresh month.



ONE WEEK OF SESSIONS · CIRCLE WHAT YOU DETECT

DAY	LEMON	ROSE	EUCALYPTUS	CLOVE
1	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5
2	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5
3	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5
4	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5
5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5
6	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5
7	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5	AM 1 2 3 4 5 PM 1 2 3 4 5

1 = nothing · 3 = faint but there · 5 = clear and full



HABIT TRACKER · ONE BOX PER DAY · MARK IT WHEN BOTH SESSIONS ARE DONE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30

The aim is not a perfect row. The aim is a row with more marks than gaps.

What change looks like

Progress in smell training rarely announces itself. It looks like a 1 becoming a 2 on one scent. A smell arriving in the first instant of a sniff and vanishing. An everyday smell, toast, rain, a person, appearing out of nowhere weeks before the training scents move. Distorted smells slowly becoming less strange. Your journal will catch these long before your memory does, which is why the low bar and the daily line matter.

Give the practice twelve weeks before you judge it, and sixteen if you can; a good deal of the slower recovery happens in the extra month. If you reach the end of that stretch, look back at your baseline before deciding what is next. Then, if you wish, keep going. The nose keeps renewing either way.

A NOTE FOR TENDER NOSES

If certain smells arrive distorted or unpleasant (a common stage of recovery called parosmia), go gently. Shorten the sniff, drop any scent that is too much for now, and return to it later. Working the edges, not forcing the centre, is still training.

PLEASE READ: this workbook is an educational practice, not a medical treatment, and it is not a substitute for assessment by a qualified clinician. If your smell loss is sudden, recent, or arrives with other symptoms, please see a doctor first. Keep essential oils off skin and away from eyes, out of reach of children and pets, and never taste them. Sniff from a couple of centimetres; there is no need to touch the jar to your nose.

Keep going with us. This short workbook is yours to keep, print, and share. The Olfactory Health newsletter is where we share what we are learning next, along with more free practices like this one: olfactoryhealth.ca

SOURCES · The original olfactory training trial (four odours, twice daily, twelve weeks): Hummel et al. (2009), *The Laryngoscope*, doi.org/10.1002/lary.20101. Meta-analysis of thirteen training studies (identification, discrimination, threshold): Sorokowska et al. (2017), *Rhinology*, doi.org/10.4193/Rhino16.195. The patient-centred, memory-anchored refinement of the practice draws on the work of Chrissi Kelly and AbScent. Citations verified via PubMed, August 2026.