

Activity: Herbs Goal: Sensory Populations: Other Specialized Populations

## TH Activity Plan – Herbal Heating Bags

Text by Diane Relf, PhD, HTM and Susan Morgan

Photo by D. Relf



**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participants will prepare bags filled with fragrant herbs and can be warmed.

### THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

**Physical:** Exercise fine motor skills; build hand strength/dexterity

**Psychological/Emotional:** Learn relaxation and self care techniques; boost mood; practice self regulation/pain mgmt strategies

**Sensory:** Engage olfactory, auditory, and tactile senses with herbal materials; enhance mood through sensory stimulation

**Social:** Make social connections; practice communication skills

### Materials

Bag of buckwheat seeds (50 lb bags) or by the pound from the feed and seed store

12 pieces of soft fabric (Fleece is ideal but flannel will work)

Dried lavender, lemon balm, chamomile, rosemary, or mint

Essential oil that compliments the chosen herb, such as lavender, peppermint, or a mix

Large plastic containers with lid, such as ice cream or extra large margarine tubs

Funnels, cardboard tubes, thick art paper or cardboard rolled into funnels

Plastic measuring cups

Safety pins (1-2 per bag)

Sewing supplies

Rubber bands

Trays (1 per participant)

Disposable gloves, wipes

### STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

- 1. Pre-Session Prep, part 1:** To sew a fabric case, cut fabric into rectangular pairs 24" x 8". Fold in half and sew up one of the long sides and one of the short sides to create a long tube-like case. Turn the cases right side out.
- 2. Pre-Session Prep, part 2:** Create several funnels out of the thick paper/cardboard or have several funnels on hand. The funnels should have large enough openings for herbs and buckwheat to pass through. Prepare a tray for each participant with the following materials: fabric case with an opening at the top, plastic tub with a lid, funnel, measuring cups. The herbs and oils may be distributed as needed by the facilitator.
- Facilitator begins session by explain steps. Fill each plastic container with 5-6 cups of buckwheat seeds, 1/8 cup dried lavender, 1/8 cup dried peppermint, and 1/8 cup dried rosemary. Encourage participants to run their fingers through the mix and feel the textures. Note any fragrances.
- Add 6 drops of essential oil.
- Seal container with the lid and shake the containers around to mix the oil, buckwheat seeds, and herbs evenly. Listen to the sounds and have fun making music with the newly formed percussion instruments.
- Place the funnel at the opening of the fabric case and use the plastic measuring cup to scoop the mixture from the container, through the funnel, into the case. Leave 2" of unfilled space at the top of the case.
- Fold the top edges inward and pin together.
- Secure with a rubber band until the top can be sewed together. Using sewing supplies, hand sew top edge closed. This may need to be done by a facilitator.

9. Explain that these herbal heating pads can be placed in the microwave, for about 2 minutes, or in the freezer to absorb heat or cold for sore muscles and arthritic pains. Consider printed instructions for clients.

**APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:** This activity offers ample opportunities for participants to discuss and explore self care and relaxation through multi-sensory engagement. Participants living with chronic pain, arthritis, stiffness, and other musculoskeletal and medical conditions will engage the olfactory (herbal/essential oil fragrances), auditory (percussive sounds made when shaking materials together), and tactile (handling variety of plant and other materials; warmed or cooled herbal bag) senses. The heat generated from these herbal mixtures in conjunction with the fleece fabric produces the moist heat that may be beneficial for the aforementioned medical conditions. The aroma generated when the bag is warmed and handled is also relaxing. For participants who have conditions where they may have a reduced sense of smell, the other sensory aspects of the herbal bags (auditory and tactile) are still engaging. Make the fabric pieces smaller, 8”x 2-1/2”, or utilize unused, clean socks; fill with herbs and flax seed to be used as an herbal eye pillow for relaxation or tension headaches.

**SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS:** Consult medical staff about warm/cold compress applications for participants with medical conditions. Be aware that some essential oils may cause skin irritation or other issues for some people. There are some oils that are only for aromatherapy use. Make sure the oil is safe to use; consult medical staff as necessary. Because essential oils can be quite potent, use disposable gloves to protect hands and reduce lingering scents on hands following activity. Keep in mind that some participants may have strong olfactory sensitivities (due to medical conditions or medications they are taking) – alert these participants to the possibility of the strong fragrances during the session and give them the choice of attending the session or avoid using the essential oils altogether, only using the dried herbs for subtle fragrance. Supervise safe handling of materials and equipment during the activity. Monitor individuals with tendencies to place non-food items in the mouth. Make sure to collect safety pins immediately after use.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** Buckwheat hulls are more frequently used for this activity but are much more expensive. Buckwheat seeds contain rather volatile essential fats inside the seed that aren't protected very well after the airtight hull has been removed. Oxygen makes the essential oils in the seed go rancid, giving it a bad taste and making it unfit to eat. Some materials and equipment, such as measuring cups and funnels, may be shared among participants as needed. Use a variety of different fabrics, so each participant can make choices about which fabric they prefer for their individual heating pad. Build confidence and self esteem by utilizing the talents of participants with sewing skills to create the fabric cases. Sew handles into each end of the herbal heating pad to make adjusting it easier in hard to reach areas such as the back.

Refer to THAD *Harvesting and Drying Flowers* activity plan.

**REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:**

Bowman, J. (2018). How to make a homemade heating pad.

<https://www.healthline.com/health/pain-relief/how-to-make-a-homemade-heating-pad>

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2023.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.