

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Sweet Smell of SEXcess *

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With the approach of **Valentine's Day**, people are more concerned than usual about being appealing to a potential mate. However, many ads warn us of the mortal sin of body odor ("BO") and how it can cause us to lose both friends and lovers. In an attempt to smell good to others, many of us buy the advertised perfumes and colognes. Is our body odor really that important? Will it adversely affect our love life? Will it affect other relationships? (Although our natural body odor is seen as offensive in the United States, many foreign countries do not share this view.)

In 1997, a psychological study was conducted to see how sensitive we are to body odors. College students were offered \$10 to wear a T-shirt for 48 hours. During this period, they had to do some heavy exercise – pushups, calisthenics, jogging – for at least one hour. At the end of the two-day period, the subjects peeled the shirts off and returned them to the experimenters in tightly sealed bags. Demonstrating an extreme dedication to psychological research, the students then smelled the anonymous shirts and rated them for relative offensiveness. (I think the experimenters really got their \$10 worth from these subjects.)

Subjects generally agreed as to which shirts smelled worse. The anonymous owners of the most putrid shirts were rated as dirtier, less intelligent, less healthy, fatter and less appealing to the opposite sex. However, not all the traits attributed to the most putrid shirts were bad. Their owners were also seen as stronger, more industrious and more athletic. Essentially, it seems as if they were seen as tough and hard-working, but mindless and dirty drones. In addition, subjects rated their *own* shirts as *least* offensive. Living with your own odor for a long time may make you more tolerant toward it (or less likely to make a "stink" about it).

**If you love people, their natural body odors
are likely to smell good to you.**

Another series of studies – similar to the one mentioned above – were done in 1981 in West Germany, Italy and Japan. However, in this case, **married couples** had to wear their T-shirts to bed for a week. When these anonymous shirts were smelled, subjects could identify the T-shirts worn by their mates – even when blindfolded. (Apparently the "nose knows" its mate.) In these studies both men and women generally considered the odors of men more obnoxious than women's odors. Subjects also tended to rate their mate's odor as less offensive than their own.

However, there was one exception to the last finding. Japanese women considered their husband's body odor more obnoxious than their own. The researchers speculate that this is probably because the Japanese marriages are still frequently arranged by families. (In other words, the Japanese don't always get to "sniff out" a mate for themselves.)

Essentially, it seems as though we tend to like things that are more familiar to us, even in terms of odors. If we have strong positive feelings toward someone – sights, sound and *odors* of that person can elicit positive responses. The odor can be from a perfume or cologne, or it could be that person's natural body odor. If you love someone, that person does not need to use perfumes or colognes to smell good.

Smelling good is not always advantageous. When going to a **job interview**, we all want to make a good impression. Beside being washed, well dressed and neat, most of us want to smell good too. To accomplish

this goal, we may dab on some appealing perfume or cologne. What effect does this have on the interviewer?

The effect of odor in job interviews was investigated by psychologist Robert Baron of Purdue University in 1983. (His findings may hold some surprises for you.) As you might expect, women interviewers rated applicants who wear perfume or cologne more positively. In contrast, male interviewers rate applicants who wear perfume or cologne – men and women alike – more *negatively* than those who abstain. (For male interviewers, apparently the "*smell of success*" is not that sweet.) In fact, male interviewers were most harsh in their ratings for women who wear perfume and also engage in "*forward*" body language such as leaning toward the interviewer or persistently seeking eye contact.

Baron's explanation is that men are more rigid than women interviewers – men are more susceptible to the stereotype that serious things should not come in fragrant packages. Many men believe that applicants should limit their presentation to demonstrating ability and ambition. So – if you have a job interview with a man – be aware that you probably will not "*win by a nose*."

* Adapted from Spencer Rathus' *Psychology*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1987, pages 146-148.