

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## "Do you smell, or do you stink?"

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

In contrast to common usage, to "*smell*" is to *sense* an odor. However, "*stinking*" technically means you are *giving off* an odor, either good or bad. So if someone says, "*You smell*," technically that person is saying that you sense odors. In contrast, if he says, "*You stink*," that is another matter.

Our ability to sense odors varies greatly, depending on how long we have been smelling an odor and what we have smelled previously. Our sense of smell **adapts** (adjusts) quickly. In fact, the stronger the odor, the more quickly our smell adapts.

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### Our sense of smell adapts quickly.

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A friend, who had been in a submerged submarine for a long period of time, was one of the few privileged persons to go on deck, when the submarine surfaced. He enjoyed the invigorating smell of the sea air. However, when he was about to go below deck again, he noticed a terrible odor coming out of the hatch. He asked a seaman (who was below deck), "What is that terrible odor?"

The seaman replied, "*I don't smell anything*." Was the seaman joking or lying? If not, why didn't he smell anything?

While submerged, all the men gradually adapted to the various odors that develop when you have 40-60 men working in a cramped space. However, when my friend went on deck, he *lost his adaptation*. Coming back to the hatch, the stream of various body odors was overpowering to him. In contrast, the seaman below deck was still adapted to the inside odors. Therefore, he was unaware of any odor.

Likewise, if you have a gym class, you are very aware of the odor of sweat, when you first enter the locker room to change for class. In a short time (30 seconds or so), your sense of smell will adapt. You are no longer aware of the odor. However, if you keep going in and out of the locker room, you will repeatedly lose your adaptation and will be almost constantly aware of the stink.

When you visit a hospital ward where patients have poor bladder control, the initial odor of urine is very strong. You may wonder, "*How could anyone work in a place like this?*" However, like those who work there, as you remain on the ward, you will quickly adapt and no longer be aware of the stink of urine.

If you have a friend who has **B.O.** (body odor), you may wonder why he (or she) doesn't do anything about it. If that person is around himself all the time – which is impossible to avoid – he has probably adapted to his own odor. If a chance breeze blows his odor away from his nose, he will lose his adaptation and notice his stink. However, he is likely to assume that this bad odor is coming from some other source. He would probably assume it wasn't him, because he would have noticed it before. So if you notice a friend with B.O., first make sure it isn't you. Then be kind enough to tactfully make him (her) aware of it.

There is another fact about smell that many people do not know – *you taste with your nose*. That's right! The taste buds on your tongue only sense combinations of four basic tastes – sweet, sour, bitter and salt. In contrast, the subtle variations of various tastes are by your nose, not your tongue. This is why a cold in the nose ruins the taste of good food. Because smoking deadens your sense of smell, many master chefs request that their patrons not smoke before a meal. In addition, wine tasters always sniff the wine, before they put it

in their mouth. On the other hand, if you have a bad-tasting medicine to swallow, you can reduce the bad taste by holding your nose while taking it.

When you smell, I hope the odors will be pleasant. On the other hand, if you stink...I have the same wish.

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