

Sniff: reading

AAHH! The smell of clean sheets on the bed, freshly cut grass in the garden and the aroma of newly baked bread from the kitchen. Rose gardens and coconut shampoo, sea breezes and perfumed incense before an altar - breathe in and enjoy.



But for Joanna Smith none of these give her any pleasure. Why? Because she was born without a sense of smell. No sniffing jasmine in the evening, inhaling the scent of virgin olive oil or telling the difference between freshly ground or instant coffee. For Joanna it all smells like air. As a child she couldn't understand how her sister knew what was for dinner by the smell coming from the kitchen.

"It took a long time to persuade my mother that I couldn't smell anything," says Joanna. Eventually, after making her daughter smell nail varnish remover and then vinegar without any effect, Mrs Smith had to admit that Joanna was different.

School friends also needed some convincing. Joanna recalls with horror the day she denied being able to smell a classmate's perfume. "My friends didn't believe me. They then insisted I drank some of it. The idea was if I couldn't smell it then maybe I could taste it. They were surprised when I agreed – only to vomit violently during the maths class. They realised then I was telling the truth!"

Now that Joanna has grown up she has learnt to adapt her scent-free lifestyle. She lives on her own and so was sensible enough to get a smoke alarm. But this didn't help when the gas cooker had a leak. "My mother came round and as soon as she came in she almost fainted from the stink of gas. I now have a gas leak detector too."

"I have also suffered from food poisoning a few times as I can't sniff and decide if something is off or not. Now I never keep food for more than two days and always check the best-before dates very carefully."

It's not only herself that Joanna has to think about but her visiting friends too. "I know, for example, that fruit teas are very popular nowadays. They're just different coloured hot drinks as far as I'm concerned but I have them in the cupboard for guests. I can tell the difference between bitter, sweet, salty and sour but without smell there is no flavour. I know if something is sweet, but not if it's raspberry or strawberry. And I avoid seasoning anything I cook preferring to leave the salt and pepper out for visitors to use themselves. As for wine – that's just another kind of vinegar to me, but I do have a few bottles for friends to help themselves."

And there is one other thing Joanna worries about - body odour. "I insist on having a shower every morning, no matter how late I am for work, and on wearing clean clothes every day too. I don't look forward to the summer and standing on a crowded bus – I'm just so embarrassed I might pong!"

Joanna was, however, very helpful when her sister had her first baby. "Unlike my sister, who has a keen sense of smell, I was always willing to change the baby's nappy!" She also never objected to taking any cough medicine as a child, nor did she refuse to eat her brussels sprouts, and she doesn't mind taking the rubbish out.

But there are other less obvious things about smells. They are linked very closely with memory and are very evocative – for some people the smell of ketchup or their grandmother's soap will remind them strongly of their childhood. A suntan lotion or ice cream can take someone back to their first day by the seaside, chocolate cake and lemonade to a birthday, and cigar smoke to a wedding. Humans can tell the difference between thousands of different smells and these affect the way we feel and behave. Smell is linked to basic pleasures and is also associated with danger and warnings.

For Joanna this emotive side of smell is unknown to her and therefore she doesn't miss it. For those of us who can smell the many images and sensations that scents evoke are so common we don't give them much thought. But for those who lose the sense of smell, for example after an infection, this loss can affect the quality of their lives and they can become very depressed. Not having or losing the sense of smell may not be as traumatic as losing one's sight or hearing, but it can still be quite dramatic. "I'm used to it now," says Joanna "but it always amazes me how thoughtlessly people react when you tell them you can't smell. They almost always laugh. I often wonder if they would laugh if I told them I was blind."

Joanna's boyfriend is certainly not unhappy: "I can come round after a night drinking and smoking in the pub – and she never complains!"