

Feeling with your Nose

When you smell a wet mop, do you think of your elementary school cafeteria? Does the scent of a certain perfume remind you of your grandma? Smells have the ability to stir up memories. And memories evoked by smell are more connected to feelings than any other memory type.

Research shows that when you smell something connected to your past, like holiday cookies baking, you feel the emotion of that memory first. Then, your brain catches up to remember the exact situation. With all other senses, you remember with your thoughts first, and then the feelings follow.

Why is this true? Scientists know that your olfactory system, which directs your sense of smell, is linked to the parts of the brain that process emotions. When you smell something, the information goes straight to the amygdala and hippocampus.

In contrast, what you see, hear, taste, or touch is processed through the thalamus. The sensory information from these systems has to go through a “switchboard” before it can be relayed to the emotional centers of the brain.

So, when you smell the fresh cut grass of soccer fields in spring, you might be remembering more about the feeling of playing soccer and less about a specific game or practice. And when you smell the familiar scent of sunscreen, you are probably experiencing the emotion of hot summer days

instead of thinking about your last sunburn. But why is this important to know?

This knowledge is important because it could play a role in improving our mental health. Our sense of smell can influence our emotions in a special way. Scientists say we can “train ourselves to become relaxed in the presence of a scent that’s been associated with calm feelings.”

Next time you have a math test, try taking a whiff of those cookies in your lunch box. Maybe the smell will remind you of baking with your dad. With any luck, you’ll feel more the happiness that you felt in the kitchen and less of the stress of the upcoming test. Happy sniffing!



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. The word olfactory refers to what sense?
 - a. Hearing
 - b. Taste
 - c. Sight
 - d. Smell

2. What could happen when you smell sunscreen?
 - a. The information is processed in the thalamus
 - b. You think about your last sunburn
 - c. You experience the feeling of hot summer days
 - d. You remember a specific soccer game

3. Which word is NOT associated with smell?
 - a. Whiff
 - b. Image
 - c. Scent
 - d. Sniff

4. Which phrase from the passage means “on the other hand”?
 - a. Next time
 - b. In contrast
 - c. Research shows
 - d. Scientists say

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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