

" I'm not wearing too much perfume-
You're just too sensitive "

"What do you mean,
*'the floor varnish gives you a
headache'?*"

" If we accommodate you, *it'll
never end* "

'You're Too Sensitive!'

Environmental Triggers Impacting Everyday Life

As we go about our daily business, we are constantly surrounded by environmental stimuli and smells which go largely unnoticed by most of us. We have become so acclimatized to the omnipresence of car exhaust, cologne and cleaning products, it's just something we've learned to tolerate, carrying on in our personal and work lives without even a second thought.

But for those with environmental or [Multiple Chemical Sensitivity \(MCS\)](#), this is often *all* they can focus on. An extreme awareness of scents can manifest itself in all consuming ways, ranging from distracting headaches to difficulty breathing.

Unfortunately, by being in the minority, these individuals are often perceived as being 'unreasonably overly-sensitive', and subsequently downplayed. Concerns may be trivialized, with



well-meaning bystanders telling them that it is merely an issue of 'changing their mindset.'

We met up with some Montrealers living with the condition in order to gain a better understanding of this lived experience.

A former administrative assistant for various organizations, Joanna continually struggled with her colleagues' perfumes. She would regularly experience coughing fits and have to retreat to the safety of her office. Ironically, she was a frequent wearer of masks even before the pandemic hit, particularly on confined spaces such as buses, lessening the intensity of scents.



Kyle Broad, Unsplash

But while wearing a mask on a bus may be permitted (if given some odd looks pre-pandemic), it's a little trickier in the office.

She shared how a colleague was overly zealous in his application of strong cologne and was offended at the polite request to limit it. "But my wife loves it" he would protest, she recalled.

So how does one address the need for accommodations with the desire to be collegial at work?

Joanna explained the difficulty when a former director resented when she worked with her door shut, yet was also reluctant to change her perfume. Even when accommodations *are* made, they are often grudgingly done so, straining dynamics in the workplace. It is for this reason that individuals affected by MCS often have to [consider potentially changing jobs](#) to avoid making waves rather than request changes.

Difficulties can often arise in older buildings with carpets that have absorbed and retained odors or alternatively, new workplaces which are frequently cleaned with harsh chemicals. In order to respond to this reality, the [Environmental Health Association of Quebec](#) has compiled a useful [eco living guide](#) of inexpensive and easily accessible disinfectant alternatives. As noted by Joanna, "I love citrus [the basis for many cleaning products]- It's when they try to manufacture the scent that is the problem. I feel like I'm being 'attacked' by the chemical scent."

This situation also plagued Matt when searching for an apartment. A senior quality assurance consultant in the video game industry, he was looking forward to moving to a new place, but had to change plans when the floor varnish proved to be too overpowering.



Mahdi Bafande, Unsplash

He shared that his asthma had always been controllable, but that it dramatically worsened after a mold infestation in his apartment.

While most asthmatics tend to have little tolerance for cigarette smoke or bleach fumes, "I am also very susceptible to low concentrations of other chemicals, especially the volatile organic compounds found in paints, new plastics, varnish, some building materials, adhesives, etc." He had to wear an N95 mask to stay in the proposed new apartment, which was of course not practical for living there long-term.

Similarly, when a pipe was being fixed in Carolyn's building, the former animal sitter had to live at her mom's for the duration as she could not handle the moisture or dust.

"In general, people do not understand environmental sensitivities," she observed. "Scent sensitivity is just not on their radar, similar to food aversions and selectivity." Individuals may perceive it as intentionally 'being difficult' and seeking attention. Such attitudes merely compound the problem and make finding a mutually agreed upon compromise all the more challenging.

Matt concurred; "There is some incredulity there. People not understanding or believing that I am so greatly affected by something which...they cannot detect [themselves]." He continued, "It's very frustrating [to] feel...in dire straits and for someone to doubt your situation is real at all."

Happily, there have been some advances with some locations being willing to change to natural cleaners (such as the daycare where Carolyn had worked) and an increasing number of scent-free establishments such as Air Canada.



Molnár Bálint, Unsplash

This is a very hopeful if small step for those with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities, because as Joanna shared, "I would love to stop being 'so sensitive'."



For help in choosing healthy alternatives, visit our Eco Living Guide:
www.EcoLivingGuide.ca

If you would like to become a member you can follow this link: <https://aseq-ehaq.ca/en/take-action/become-a-member/>

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