

Comments on Psychological Impact of Offensive Odors

Report of G. Fred Lee & Associates
El Macero, CA
www.gfredlee.com gfredlee33@gmail.com
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Based on discussions with others, too often people are looking at the potential for a biological connection (epidemiological) between the operation of the facility and the impact on human health and almost always ignore the psychological aspect of odor. By concentrating on the epidemiological element, most people are entering into a highly complicated area in which there are multiple variables that can negate each other: an ex-smoker who lives near a landfill in an area with radon. However, odor is much better understood from a psychological aspect and I would ask that you explore this as well. For example, anosmia is the human health condition where people lose their sense of smell. It often occurs with smokers. That is why when you get into a smoker's car, you think it smells awful, but they can't smell a thing. However, anosmia also can occur with exposure to sulfides and that is the reason why landfill employees can't smell the odors and neighbors can. Industry people at times mention that slight odors are a part of the business, but what they know is that slight odors can actually cause you to become less sensitive over time. Hydrogen sulfide exposure is a real problem with certain industries, due to the employees' not being able to smell it and being exposed to lethal quantities. They wear detectors on their belts to prevent them from accidentally walking into an area with lethal doses.

Exposure to odors and loss of smell has been well studied. Yet, it is often ignored. Odors have been proven to cause anxiety, depression and other negative psychological reactions. The human body's reaction to odor is vital to our existence and dictates how we live. It also has an incredible bearing on our psychology. Did you ever have a bad odor that you could smell in your house, but couldn't find? It is impossible to ignore and you will stay up as long as it takes to get rid of it. Or did you ever open the refrigerator and find a rotten piece of food and you gag immediately. Why do you want to throw-up when you smell something? Other odors cause headaches and others can make you hungry. . . .like chocolate.

Too often people say that odor is subjective, but that is not true. Hazardous odors are extremely objective and the human body has been wired to be very accurate to prevent you from killing yourself. Why do we use a certain scent for natural gas? The scent is immediately assumed as not "natural" and is used effectively to save lives.

The reality is that the slight odors, regardless of their frequency, cause an innate human reaction. Over time they can have a great bearing on people. For example, could you imagine if each night I hid a dead mouse in your house and you had to find it? Within the week you would start acting towards me in ways not normal and while I could tell you that the odor of the mouse won't kill you (epidemiologically speaking) there isn't a person alive who would not say I am not adversely affecting your life and should stop immediately. However, why then do people all assume that the sulfides from the dead mouse are not acceptable, but that the sulfides from a landfill have no proven health effect? The reality is that it doesn't matter where the odor is coming from, the human body is reacting naturally and thus causing adverse psychological effects. It is telling you to get away, but how can you get away from your house???

G. Fred Lee, PhD, MSPH, PE, DEE