

Memories most excited by those wonderful smells

by Mark Pavilons

?Smell is a potent wizard that transports you across thousands of miles and all the years you have lived.? ? Helen Keller

Sitting in a parking lot on a Saturday morning, my senses were overwhelmed by scents from several fast food joints. It triggered a memory and took me back.

It was a powerful moment, one filled with a host of emotions. Maybe my wife and I we're back sitting on the deck at the Fatman's Nephew in Port Lucaya, or having a drink from a vendor in Sosua.

I didn't have to know where I was exactly, to revel in this cerebral flashback. It was tasty! I almost shed a tear during this time-travelling moment that lasted only a minute or so.

The power of the mind. And the schnoz!

?As humans, we navigate the world mainly using sight,? says psychiatrist Drew Cumming, MD. ?But the primitive areas of our brains still have connections from when our ancestors relied on smell to survive. These connections are the basis for scent memories.?

Your sense of smell starts when molecules in the air bind to smell receptors in the back of your nose. Like a lock and key, each receptor is specific for one type of odorant. When the two meet, it produces electrical signals in nerve cells (neurons) that travel to your brain.

The first stop for these nerve signals is the olfactory bulb, located just above your nasal cavity. The olfactory bulb processes the signals and sends them to structures deeper in your brain, including your Piriform cortex, which interprets nerve signals into what you know as a smell, and Amygdala, the emotional centre of your brain

If there's a strong emotion with the smell, the amygdala signals the hippocampus, where memories are formed. Nerve signals are also sent to the frontal lobes of your brain, which play a role in memory.

Your brain decides whether to form a long-term memory based on the significance of the experience, the doctor notes.

Research has shown that memories associated with smell carry more emotion than visual memories. One study exposed people to both smell and visual cues, and smell had a significantly greater effect on activity in the amygdala and the participants' reported emotions.

Smell is not only our first sense to develop in utero, but it helped in our survival and evolution.

Smell helped us identify food, mating partners and danger. Although the human olfactory system changed over time, it functions much the same as it does in animals. Scent memories result from brain connections that are designed to help us stay alive.

Well, chock one up for those pool-side tasty, frosty beverages for keeping me alive!

For many people, smell-induced memories recall experiences from childhood. The reason may have something to do with the rapid brain development in early life.

?In animals, the smell-processing parts of the brain are among the first to develop,? says Dr. Cumming. ?That's not exactly what

happens in people, but childhood is when many brain connections are forming.?

Most of the time, smells spur pleasant memories that connect you with our younger selves.

Typically, we feel a bit happier afterwards.

So, aside from the biological technicalities, aren't smells wonderful?

When we describe smells to other people, they get it, right away. They're embedded in our brains.

I love the damp, musty smell of carpets in Caribbean hotels. It's the smell of the ocean, a scent of holidays and great times.

Most of us will agree some of the most wondrous smells in the world include freshly brewed coffee, chocolate, bread right out of the oven, and BBQ. I love the smell of our dogs, dry or wet!

Who hasn't taken in a deep breath through the nose after a summer's rain?

There's that 'new car' smell; old book aroma, fresh-out-of-the-dryer fragrance, and of course that 'new baby' scent. In my business, I'm well aware of the smell of off-the-presses newsprint.

I'm not sure how those are key to our survival, but I'll take each and every one of those.

I have a fondness for muscle cars of the 1970s and one of their distinguishing features is the smell of gas rushing through carburetors. Just like outboard motors, the smell of gas excites memories, or at least feelings of reckless youth, doing donuts, or spending summers on the lake.

Even when neighbours pull on their mowers, the smell of gas is the epitome of spring and summer.

This is the main reason I love these two seasons and dislike the cold. In warmer air, odor molecules travel faster so we can enjoy the bouquet that nature has to offer.

I'd like to add the whiff of freshly-cut grass to the list of wonderful aromas.

And, as a kid, who doesn't remember the smell of those pink gum sticks included in trading cards? Priceless.

They say that men tend to be visually stimulated while women are touch sensitive. But I'm sure we're equally smell obsessed.

Maybe, just maybe, the best smell in the world is the person you love!

Long live the odours of our lives!