

You Can Smell Other People's Emotions, and They're Contagious

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Emotions are the primary driver of our behavior. Everything we experience in the world around us—no matter how small—generates an emotional response that motivates action. Sometimes emotions move us to act before we even have a chance to think rationally about them.

Emotions are also contagious. The brain has a host of complex methods for detecting emotions in other people, and it uses this information to mirror their emotional state. Some of these social survival mechanisms operate beneath our conscious awareness.

A new study published in the journal *Psychological Science* provides fascinating insight into one such mechanism. While many animals communicate using their sense of smell, it has long been assumed that humans lack this ability because we do not have the olfactory sensitivity of dogs for example. However, researchers from Utrecht University in the Netherlands devised a clever method for putting this assumption to the test. They collected underarm sweat from two groups of men: one that watched frightening scenes from the film *The Shining*, and one that watched the most disgusting scenes from *Jackass*.

Next, the researchers had female subjects participate in what they thought was a vision test. During the tests, the women were unknowingly exposed to the odor of the men's sweat. When women breathed "fear sweat" from the men who watched *The Shining* they reacted with fearful expressions, and when they breathed "disgust sweat" from the men who watched *Jackass* they displayed looks of disgust.

One group of men were forced to watch the most disgusting scenes from Jackass.



[Click on the image to view this clip.](#)

The next time you walk into a room and notice a strange vibe, take a moment to understand exactly what it is you are feeling. Then take a closer look at everyone around you. You just may find that you're reacting in that way because your nose picked up on someone's emotions before your eyes did. 🌐 March 2013



You Can Smell Other People's Emotions, and They're Contagious

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.