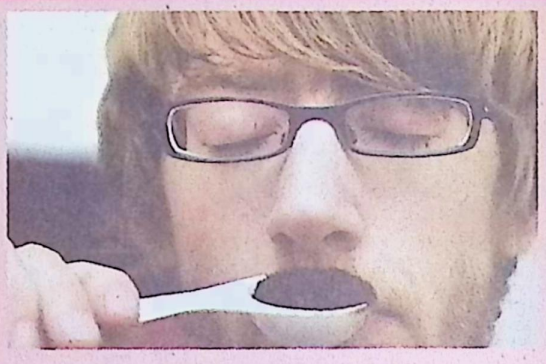
Can You Describe an Odour?

It is widely believed that people are bad at naming odors. This has led researchers to suggest smell representations are simply not accessible to the language centers of the brain. But is this really so?

English speakers grapple to describe smells. Even with familiar everyday odors, such as coffee, banana, and chocolate, English speakers only correctly name the smells around 50% of the time. This has led to the conclusion that smells defy words. Psychologist Asifa Majid from Radboud University Nijmegen and linguist Niclas Burenhult from Lund University Sweden present new evidence that this is not true in all languages.





They conducted research with speakers of Jahai, a hunter-gatherer language spoken in the Malay Peninsula. In Jahai there are around a dozen different words to describe different qualities of smell. For example, ltpit is used to describe the smell of various flowers and ripe fruit, perfume etc while Cŋɛs is used for the smell of petrol, smoke, bat droppings etc. These terms refer to different odor qualities and are abstract. English speakers, on the other hand, use mostly source-based descriptions (like a banana) or evaluative descriptions (that's disgusting).

The researchers concluded that the inability to name smells is a product of culture and not biology.

How Horses Can Teach Humans Communication Skills, Kindness

A nudge from the nose of a free-roaming zebra, or towering, 2,500-pound Clydesdale draft horse, might send others running.

But Lauren Burke, a graduate student at Case Western Reserve University's social work school, instead extends a curved hand to return the equine "hello."

Burke spent 18 months learning to communicate with horses (and a zebra) and teaching others how to do the same.

Before clients are introduced to the horses, Burke begins with a 15-minute lesson in nonverbal horse communications -- the meaning of ear positioning, swishing tails, and handling a nose-to-nose welcome.

No one rides the horses. Burke teaches clients how to go from greeting the horses, to creating respect and trust to leading a horse through an obstacle course, called the "Field of Possibilities." By doing so, clients achieve skills in working as a team.

The approach is based on the belief that humans and horses share a natural connection. In fact, Burke said, horses are a metaphor for humans who, like a herd, once lived and worked together, with each member contributing to maintaining the tribe. And, like an isolated and lonely human, horses also suffer emotional and physical problems when separated from their herds.

