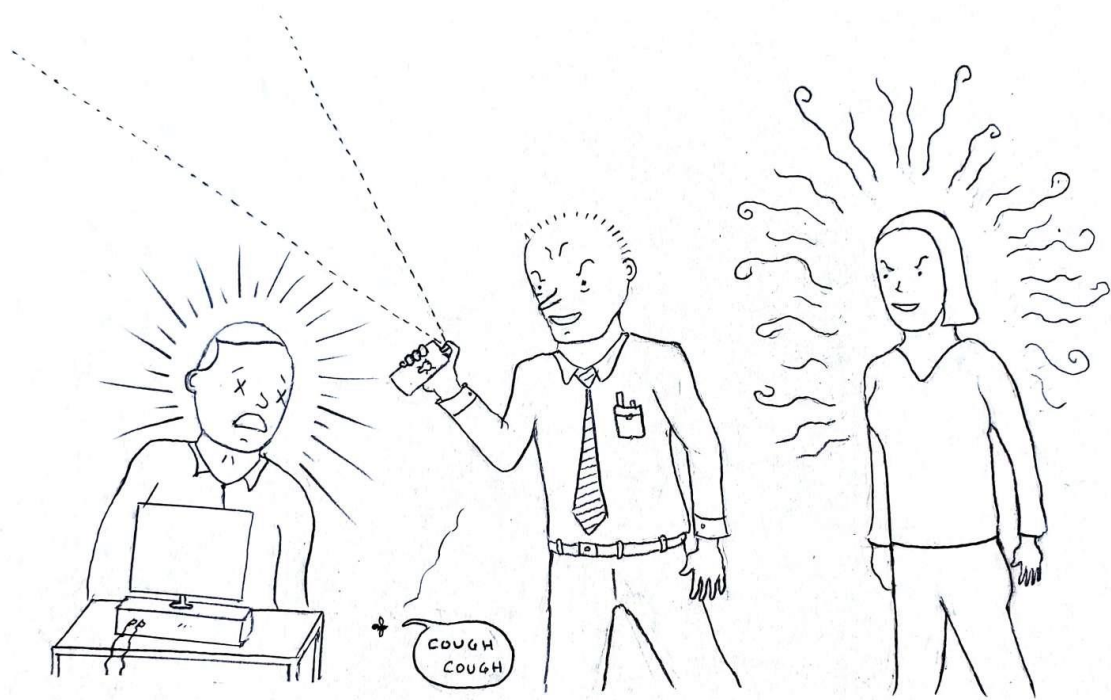


## Workplace harassment of people with chemical sensitivities



**People with multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) are sometimes harassed at work by supervisors and colleagues. Fragrances are commonly used as a weapon by the harassers.**

*Keywords: chemical sensitivity, MCS, workplace, harassment, attack, assault, fragrance, perfume, anaphylactic shock*

When people get MCS, they are often faced with the dilemma whether to tell the boss or not. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, with the 2008 update, is clear that an employer must accommodate someone disabled by MCS, within reason, since “breathing” is a necessary function. But disclosing such a vulnerability can invite harassment from both supervisors and colleagues.

Since MCS is sometimes falsely portrayed as “not legitimate” by popular media, bosses and colleagues may feel justified in ignoring or even ridiculing the needs of someone with MCS.

There are no studies of what the general population think about people with MCS, but according to *Scientific American* (Hutson, 2019), people with disabilities tie with overweight people as the group subjected to the most implicit bias (ahead of race, sexuality, skin tone and age). A British study shows that workers with disabilities were much more likely to suffer harassments than other workers (Fevre, 2013).

A request for toning down the use of fragrances is often seen as an invasion of people's personal freedom, just as it used to with tobacco use.

Changes to the work setup to improve the air quality for the MCS sufferer often involve moving him or her to a private room or next to a window that can be opened. However, this may be seen by colleagues as bestowing special privileges to someone they consider "undeserving."

In some cases people may even feel "powerful" if they can hurt someone else, now they know their vulnerability and it doesn't look like there will be any repercussions from management.

### **Harassment at the office**

The worst case of workplace harassment this writer is aware of was against a federal employee in Washington, DC (he wishes to be anonymous). He had worked there for several years before he got sick with MCS. Fragrances were a particular problem, and there were several people in the department who loved the stuff. He pleaded with them to use less, but it had the opposite effect – they used more. A sympathetic colleague even forwarded him e-mails where some of the harassers conspired to all wear the strongest perfumes they owned on certain days. His weekends were spent recovering from the toxic attacks. His work life became a hell.

He asked management for help, but it was reluctant. They would not ask the staff to lay off their fragrances. Eventually he was allowed a private office, but this further incensed his colleagues as that was a status symbol. The harassers would make excuses to walk into his office wearing their strong perfume. This has also happened to others (McCormick, 2001, Lipson, 2006).

The poor guy was eventually allowed to work from home, but just a couple days a week.

He struggled on for several years that way, until he was able to retire because of age. He did not try to get on disability.

This all happened around year 2000, when any sort of MCS harassment suit was impossible to win – and he would not consider it anyway. He was not the type that stood up for himself.

A woman with MCS worked in an office. The woman at the adjacent desk frequently applied nail polish to her fingers, which evaporates strong toxic fumes, including acetone. There were many other problems, and no help.

Eventually, the boss allowed her to work from home using a computer. But the other employees thought that was not fair and complained so much he ordered her back in the office. She had to quit the job.

### **Other stories of harassment**

A few stories have been published. A report from a disability support center in California includes these two quotes from a survey (Roval, 2004):

*One co-worker made "Twilight Zone" theme song noises when she went by my office, which was across from the owner's office, after she found out. We were not friends.*

*Most were sarcastic and did hateful things. ... I was treated awful by co-workers and administrators alike. Women I thought were close friends backed away and disappeared when I asked them to stop wearing fragrance around me.*

There are several stories of coworkers deliberately spraying fragrances to harass, such as this one told by Kathleen (Lipson, 2006):

*The gal who sprayed perfume outside both doors and then smirked in the window directly at me as she heard me complain to my coworkers that there were huge amounts of perfume coming in first one door then the other.*

In another case, the employee with MCS had an office with a window that could open so he could get fresh air. The area outside was a no-smoking zone, but his coworkers liked to smoke there anyway. When he complained about it, the next day his office door was sprayed with perfume (Lipson, 2004).

In another documented story, the woman with MCS was moved to a private office, but one that was much worse than her shared office, which was clearly by intent (McCormick, 2001). She also suffered various forms of harassment, such as

fragrances sprayed on her door, nasty notes on the department bulletin board and much else.

A major problem is that coworkers and bosses don't realize how bad such acts are, and often blow them off as mere pranks. They would not think the same if someone sabotaged a wheelchair.

A central problem is that MCS is often seen as illegitimate. As one survey responder stated:

*My whole situation was met with skepticism and doubt. The general feeling I got was that I was somehow trying to get out of work or cause trouble and that they really don't believe me or that the chemicals were making me ill. ... Even when I took in materials covering MCS I was met with skepticism and no action on requests were taken seriously (Roval, 2004).*

### **Successes in court**

A landmark MCS workplace lawsuit was won in 2010. Susan McBride sued the City of Detroit, since her supervisor refused to accommodate her inability to breathe in a fragranced office (McBride vs. Detroit, 2010; Action News Detroit, 2010).

In 2017 Caltrans employee John Barrie won a similar lawsuit. His supervisor kept exposing him to toxic cleaning products and fragrances. When he complained, he was harassed in various ways, was demoted and called names. Sometimes he would return to his desk and find his personal things soaked in fragrances. The employer appealed the verdict and lost again (Ashton, 2017; Venteicher, 2019).

### **Assault with perfume**

Actual assault has happened. A well-documented case took place in a doctor's office in 2001. A medical assistant commented on a patient's powerful fragrance. This incensed the patient who pulled out a fragrance device and sprayed the medical assistant in her face so she collapsed with anaphylactic shock. Fortunately, this happened in a medical facility so help was readily available, but the assistant still had to be hospitalized (Lessenger, 2001).

The assailant was not charged (Lessenger, 2019).

## Regarded as an asset

There is a story where the coworkers regarded the person with MCS as an asset. That was in a factory in the 1980s, where a woman with MCS could detect leaks of toxic solvents well before anyone else.

Whenever she detected a leak, she would notify the others and then go to the business office. The coworkers investigated, and found she was always right. They saw this as a way to keep them safe (Schottenfeld 1987).

## More information

The website [www.eiwellspring.org](http://www.eiwellspring.org) has other stories and information about living with multiple chemical sensitivity.

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## 6 *Work harassment*

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