



**Part  
7B**

## **Scents and Access in Dance Spaces: An Introduction**

### **Acknowledgements**

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Responses to scents are very personal and very cultural. Each of us absorbs attitudes about smells from very early in life—attitudes that can be emotionally loaded. Some people have been shamed about their natural body smells and made to feel that only the use of perfumes will keep them from being shamed further (and this shaming has often been gendered and racialized). We live in a culture driven by advertising that manipulates our needs to be accepted and attractive in order to sell us things, many of which are unneeded and even harmful. Would we know we ‘needed’ or wanted these things if ads for them weren’t poured into us constantly?

This gives us some context for the mass of chemical smells that we are exposed to every day in mainstream culture. People fill homes and buildings and cars with air “fresheners” that are actually toxic, and that are designed to cling to hair and clothing. These scents cannot be washed off or aired out easily. People fill their laundry with fabric softeners and scented detergents that vent intense toxins into the air outside as well as filling their homes and off-gassing from their clothing. These products too are designed to linger and be hard to wash out of fabrics. Scent is marketed as a selling point, but exposure to these products has cumulative harmful effects, and more and more people are becoming sensitized to them. Specific scent ingredients are often considered proprietary and are not required to be disclosed on labels; some are proven neurotoxins, carcinogens, and hormone disruptors. [Research](#) has shown that around 30% of people already experience health problems from exposure to fragranced products.

Some of these chemically injured people are members of our dance and music communities who would really love to be able to participate in music, song, and dance activities. But when they enter a dance or music space full of ambient fragrances—people wearing fragrances, scented deodorants and hair products, clothing heavily scented from laundry products, even scented hand soap and sanitizer—they cannot breathe or think clearly, and trying to simply enjoy singing, dancing, or playing becomes dangerous and impossible for them. The symptoms these products cause are intense and can last long after an exposure, so it's not just a matter of getting through an uncomfortable evening.

Dancing, more than many other activities, puts sensitized people at even greater risk of harmful exposure when scents are present because of *proximity* and *activity*. Contra and English dancing put numerous other people close to you; you can't simply choose a fragrance-free partner and stay safe. Everyone is being physically active, which causes deeper and more frequent breathing in of fragrances, and it causes sweating, which makes laundry products and deodorants off-gas much more than if the wearers were sitting still. That effect is multiplied by all the scent-wearing people at a given dance. It creates a toxic environment for everyone, and is a significant barrier to access for those who have become sensitized.

The chemical environment at an event is truly an issue of access. Disabilities that are not obviously apparent to others, often called *invisible disabilities*, are real and valid disabilities that create actual barriers to equal access. A person who can't breathe inside a space, or who will be ill for days after being there if they try to tough it out despite exposure, is effectively as barred from access as a person who can't get in because of stairs with no ramps or elevators. Because they care about equity and access, more and more dance communities, camps, and events are going fragrance-free, notably many on the West Coast of the U.S., and Pinewoods Camp.

If you're not currently aware of being affected by scents, you may not even notice the chemicals that impact those who have sensitivity, so you may be surprised and upset to be told your scents are problematic. Sensitized people have been through a lot, and if they have to approach you about a scent that's causing them distress, they're probably already feeling unwell and unsafe. They are likely filled with adrenaline from their physiological reaction to the scents, their stress about having to deal with it *again* (they've had this conversation many times before, and it has often not gone well), and concern about your potential reaction to their request and the impact on your relationship. They have often been invalidated, disbelieved, judged, and shamed for their reactions to scents, and they dread experiencing that yet again.

On the other side, it's emotionally difficult to hear that your use of a product you enjoy or barely notice the scent of is harming someone else. You may really like some scented products and be very attached to them, or feel some sense of identity from using them, and your feelings are valid too. It's reasonable to feel upset if someone is distressed by you just living your life and using your usual products. You're not bad for having been unaware of this issue, and as discussed above, we all live in a culture that is steeped in advertising to

create a perceived need and expectation for buying and using scented products.

Making the changes necessary to remove scented products from dance environments (both in our facilities and on our bodies) is an important element of providing equitable access for everyone. Changing to fragrance-free products will have a learning curve and may require some effort at first. Emotions can run high on all sides of this issue. Depending on their situation and lifestyle, asking people to change to fragrance-free products can be a significant request.

Every equity conversation can be challenging for all involved. No one wants to be excluded or harmed, and most people find it difficult to learn that their normal way of doing things is actually harmful and to be asked to make changes, so there may be some uncomfortable moments along the way. But that discomfort is unlikely to be a barrier to access, while the presence of scented products is a significant barrier to access for those who suffer from sensitivities. Valuing equity calls on us to think and learn about barriers to access, and to do what we can to mitigate them so that everyone who would like to participate in our events is able to do so.

This guide will provide resources, links, checklists, and suggestions for ways to keep your dance environments as accessible as possible to those who are sensitized to fragrances. We welcome your feedback about anything from broken links to ways it could be improved, things we've missed, how your efforts are going, etc.

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## Endnote

More people than can be named here have contributed significantly to the process of formulating and compiling this guide, but we want to especially acknowledge Morna Leonard, Kathryn Bowman, Lindsey Dono, and Amy Wimmer.

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