

# What Universal Human Experiences Are You Missing Without Realizing It?

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Remember [Galton's experiments on visual imagination?](#) Some people just don't have it. And they never figured it out. They assumed no one had it, and when people talked about being able to picture objects in their minds, they were speaking metaphorically.

And the people who *did* have good visual imaginations didn't catch them. The people without imaginations mastered this "metaphorical way of talking" so well that they passed for normal. No one figured it out until Galton sat everyone down together and said "Hey, can we be really really clear about exactly how literal we're being here?" and everyone realized they were describing different experiences.

I thought about this recently during a conversation with Ozy:

**Ozy:** I am currently eating chickpeas and rice and I am *delighted* by the fact that I can eat this *whenever I want*. The nice thing about DISCOVERING YOUR FOOD PREFERENCES is that suddenly all the food in my cupboards is food I like and

am looking forward to eating. And usually I get food I like by, like, luck? So this is excitement.

**Scott:** I don't understand, why didn't you buy things like that before?

**Ozy:** It took me a while to have enough of a sense of the food I like for "make a list of the food I like" to be a viable grocery-list-making strategy.

**Scott:** I've got to admit I'm confused and intrigued by your "don't know my own preferences" thing.

**Ozy:** Hrm. Well, it's sort of like... you know how sometimes you pretend to like something because it's high-status, and if you do it well enough you *actually believe* you like the thing? Unless I pay a lot of attention *all* my preferences end up being not "what I actually enjoy" but like "what is high status" or "what will keep people from getting angry at me"

**Scott:** How does that apply to food?

**Ozy:** Well, sometimes people will tell you a certain food is high-status or healthy or a thing that everyone enjoys, and then I would like it. And a lot of times I just ate whatever was in front of me or ordered whatever the cheapest vegetarian thing on the menu was. And I... sort of vaguely had a sense that some things were more pleasurable to eat than other things but I didn't like *keep track* of what they were or any-

thing. Because if I knew I might like the *wrong things*. And also because I didn't intuitively grasp that the "liking" thing everyone was talking about was related to pleasure and not to like popularity/status.

So the fact that people talk about what foods they like about a zillion times a day isn't enough to make everyone realize liking foods is a thing.

But it gets worse. A high school friend posted on Facebook a link to [a really interesting answer on Quora](#). It makes you log on, so I'll copy the relevant part below:

I have anosmia, which means I lack smell the way a blind person lacks sight. What's surprising about this is that I didn't even know it for the first half of my life.

Each night I would tell my mom, "Dinner smells great!" I teased my sister about her stinky feet. I held my nose when I ate Brussels sprouts. In gardens, I bent down and took a whiff of the roses. I yelled "gross" when someone farted. I never thought twice about any of it for fourteen years.

Then, in freshman English class, I had an assignment to write about the Garden of Eden using details from all five senses. Working on this one night, I sat in my room imagining a peach. I watched the juice ooze out as I squeezed at the soft fuzz. I felt the wet, sappy liquid drip from my fingers

down onto my palm. As the mushy heart of the fruit compressed, I could hear it squishing, and when I took that first bite I could taste the little bit of tartness that followed the incredible sweet sensation flooding my mouth.

But I had to write about smell, too, and I was stopped dead by the question of what a peach smelled like. Good. That was all I could come up with. I tried to think of other things. Garbage smelled bad. Perfume smelled good. Popcorn good. Poop bad. But how so? What was the difference? What were the nuances? In just a few minutes' reflection I realized that, despite years of believing the contrary, I never had and never would smell a peach.

All my behavior to that point indicated that I had smell. No one suspected I didn't. For years I simply hadn't known what it was that was supposed to be there. I just thought the way it was for me was how it was for everyone. It took the right stimulus before I finally discovered the gap.

So I guess you can just *not be able to smell* and not know it.

This makes me wonder what universal human experiences I and my friends are missing out on without realizing it.

I know one friend's answer. He discovered he was color-blind sometime in his teens. This still surprises me. People are always taking Ishihara tests (those colorful dotted circles with numbers inside of them) and discovering they're color blind. Going through life with

everyone else saying “The light was red, but now it’s green” and thinking it was weird that they were making such a big deal about subtle variations in shades of brownish-gray, but it was probably one of those metaphors.

As for me? I took a surprisingly long time to realize I was asexual. When I was a virgin, I figured sex was one of those things that seemed gross before you did it, and then you realized how great it was. Afterwards, I figured it was something that didn’t get good until you were skilled at it and had been in a relationship long enough to truly appreciate the other person. In retrospect, pretty much every aspect of male sexual culture is a counterargument to that theory, but I guess it’s just really hard for my brain to generate “you are a mental mutant” as a hypothesis.

But even bigger than that, I think I might not have had emotions, at least not fully, for about five years as a teenager when I was on SSRIs. I even sort of noticed myself not having emotions, but dismissed that as an odd thing to happen and probably other people were just being really overexuberant about things. Later I learned emotional blunting is a commonly reported side effect of SSRIs and I was probably just really not experiencing emotions. When I came off them it took me several years to get used to having normal-intensity feelings again, but it wasn’t a sudden revelation, like “Wow, I was missing a fundamental human experience for the past several years!” Just a sense of things being different which was hard to cash out.

As always, I wonder if a lot of what other people interpret through vague social things might be biological, or at least more *complicatedly* social. I can't enjoy jazz music even a little – the best I can do is pick up something sort of like a beat and half-heartedly feel like maybe I could snap my fingers to it if I could build up the energy. My brother fell in love with jazz as soon as he heard it and is now a professional jazz musician who has dedicated his life to it. Are we listening to the same thing when we hear a jazz tune? Or am I like a guy who can't smell trying to appreciate perfume?