

“This Job is Making Me Sick”: Strategies for Supporting Youth with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities or Electromagnetic Sensitivity

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Many people dread sitting in parking-lot style traffic for hours during the morning commute to work. Others dread the sound of their boss’s voice berating them for unmet deadlines or other trivial concerns. But for some of us, what we dread most about heading to work—or even stepping past the front door—is the overpowering, literally sickening cocktail of chemicals in our colleagues’ perfumes, shampoos, cosmetics, or hand sanitizers, never mind the chemicals in the carpets, wall paint, or industrial cleaners in the office kitchen.

Understanding Multiple Chemical Sensitivities/Electromagnetic Sensitivity (MCS/ES)

Some studies estimate that between 6 and 13 percent of the population has some chemical sensitivity. [\[1\]](#) Multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) or electromagnetic sensitivity (ES) are hypersensitivities to chemicals or electromagnetic feedback in the environment that triggers debilitating and often extremely detrimental symptoms.

For those of us with MCS or ES, the fluorescent lights and insecticides ubiquitous in the modern office can induce debilitating symptoms that prevent us from functioning normally and efficiently on the job, but few ever notice because our disability is invisible. Unfortunately, our needs are often overlooked when discussing [workplace accommodations](#) for people with disabilities.

Even if we cannot articulate and describe our specific symptoms or their causes, [people with MCS/ES may experience symptoms because of exposure to](#)

- Perfumes, beauty products, or self care or hygiene products, even if they smell pleasant;
- Cleaning or household products, insecticides, paints, deodorizers, or air fresheners;
- Microwaves, Wi-Fi, cell phones, appliances, computers, TVs, or other devices;
- Sounds that may not be apparent to other people, such as ventilation units, fluorescent lighting, or soft vibrations;
- Materials such as plastic, polyesters, blend fabrics, or carpets;
- Tobacco smoke, auto and diesel exhaust, or disinfectants; or
- Foods, medications, and natural substances.

We may experience [physical, neurological, psychological, and or cognitive symptoms](#) during or after exposure to chemical agents or electromagnetic feedback. Solely because of this exposure, we may experience

- An inability to stay indoors or in a closed environment;
- Migraines, nausea, exhaustion, muscle aches or pains;
- Short-term cognitive difficulties such as memory loss or attention deficits;
- Chronic bacterial or viral infections and metabolic disorders;
- Physical tics, nerve pain, seizures, or difficulties with coordination; or
- Depression, irritability, or anxiety.

Accessibility Challenges Faced by Those with MCS/ES

Many people with MCS/ES have lost their jobs and experienced extended periods during which they have been unable to participate in normal life activities because of their chronic illness and disability. Some people with MCS/ES even face direct harassment, such as intentional use of scented products in the workplace or on the employee’s possessions.

Finding accessible housing is another common challenge for individuals with MCS/ES. Youth and adults with MCS/ES often face a complete lack of accommodations for accessible housing. Service professionals need to be aware that people with MCS/ES require safe housing, which may frequently mean segregated housing.

Strategies for Improving Accessibility & Supporting Youth with MCS/ES

All places where we spend time can be more accessible and welcoming environments for us in the presence of a fragrance-free policy that includes all indoor spaces and near entrances. Such a policy bans the use of any scented or fragranced products, and may explain that it exists because such products can be detrimental to the health of people with either MCS/ES or other health conditions.

When meeting with a youth who may have MCS/ES and attempting to determine appropriate and necessary accommodations for him or her, accept what the youth says at face value, even if it seems odd, abnormal, or extreme (i.e. “The new carpet is making me sick.”) Further, focus on functional needs and barriers to access rather than attempting to detail every chemical or electromagnetic agent contributing to symptoms.

Help the young person consider his or her options related to disclosing a disability to prospecting or current employers or in other situations. The [The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities](#) can help youth understand the [advantages and disadvantages of disclosure](#), think about what [accommodations](#) he or she may need, and consider the why, when, what, to whom, and how of disclosing [at work](#), [at school](#), and [in social or community settings](#). These are important steps in making the very personal decision of whether or not to disclose one’s disability.

Also, help him or her explore what reasonable accommodations might be appropriate to request. For example, [telework or telecommuting](#) is one very viable option for many employees with MCS/ES in order to avoid exposure to sensory, chemical, or electromagnetic triggers. You can use the Job Accommodation Network’s guidance on [Accommodation Ideas for Multiple Chemical Sensitivity or Environmental Illness](#) to explore accommodation options. Some accommodations that may help to alleviate symptoms for those with MCS/ES include:

- Banning vehicle idling near building or entrances
- Eliminating conventional pesticides inside and outside building
- Using integrated pest management or low impact products
- Using least toxic, low impact, unscented cleaning and maintenance products
- Assigning the individual a private office with a window that opens
- Removing carpeting in favor of tiled or hardwood floors
- Providing the individual with a copy of cleaning schedule
- Notifying the individual in advance of remodeling, renovations, or repairs to building
- Providing a low-emission computer
- Using incandescent or natural lighting instead of fluorescent lights
- Allowing flexible hours or [telework/telecommuting](#) options
- Allowing the individual to participate in meetings by phone

Even those of us with the most significant symptoms and functional needs frequently face denial of services or recognition of their disability because MCS/ES is mostly hidden and has often been misconstrued as only psychological despite its frequently significant physical inhibitions. The youth that you serve may be frustrated and resigned to systems that haven’t recognized and accommodated their disability by the time they make it to your office or center.

A welcoming and accessible environment is important for all people with disabilities, including people with MCS/ES. If you are committed to promoting inclusion and accessibility, consider the needs of people with MCS/ES ranking equally along the needs of people with physical disabilities, mental health needs, learning disabilities, and developmental/intellectual disabilities. A truly welcoming and accessible environment is welcoming and accessible for *all* people.

Related Resources:

- [The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities](#)
- [Accommodation Ideas for Multiple Chemical Sensitivity or Environmental Illness](#), Job Accommodation Network
- [National Center for Environmental Health Strategies](#)
- [Multiple Chemical Sensitivity](#)
- [The Environmental Illness Resource](#)

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[i] Kreutzer, R., Neutra, R. R., & Lashuay, N. (1999, July 1). Prevalence of people reporting sensitivities to chemicals in a population-based survey. *American Journal of Epidemiology*. 150(1). 1-12; Caress, S. M., & Steinemann, A. C. (2003, September). A review of a two-phase population study of multiple chemical sensitivities. *Environmental Health Perspectives*. 111(12). 1490-1497.