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Mind Tools: Applications and Solutions

Replies to Readers' Questions

The Emergence of Novel Information During Trance

Lee Humphries

QUESTION: I just re-read your essay "Internal Research" and wondered if by "unconscious" you mean totally asleep. I have found that my boyfriend talks, walks, and has intelligent conversations in his sleep. One time he had an almost-healed broken nose which he said he "felt healing" in his sleep. I asked his sleeping self to make an effort to heal it, to which he said alright. When I asked how he thought this worked, he confidently told me a very long neurological process that I knew he wouldn't know if awake. Although I don't totally remember it, it had something to do with "touch signals cells signal brain makes energy makes electricity signals reaction. . . ." I asked more questions to which he responded with very elaborate, intelligent answers. When I asked him how he came up with all this, he grabbed my phone, Googled "internal research," and your essay popped up. When I woke him up and told him about everything, he said "I barely know what those two words mean. Why would I put them together?" Is this an example of the internal research you were talking about? Sincerely, Alana

REPLY: Hello, Alana. I enjoyed thinking about your questions. In "Internal Research" I talk about the unconscious mind. By that I mean the vast collection of self-active mental processes that operate outside our awareness and without our willful guidance. Some people call the "unconscious mind" the "subconscious mind."

We shouldn't confuse the "unconscious mind" (mental processes) with the condition of "being unconscious" (mental states like sleep, trance, or medical anesthesia, where we have lost awareness). The confusion is understandable, though, because the processes of the "unconscious mind" may rise to the surface and become observable when one is in an "unconscious state."

Your friend gave lucid and unusual responses to questions you posed to him while he was asleep. I've seen similar responses in persons who were in a deep hypnotic trance. Achieving such a state requires two things: (1) a narrowing of the attention to exclude irrelevant external stimuli and (2) a quieting of the stream of "mental chatter" (sensations, images, and random thoughts) usually generated by our brains. Judging from your description, your friend reaches his deep "somnambulistic" state through ordinary sleep rather than through a hypnotist's induction or his own introspective efforts.

In such a state (which is both physiological and cognitive) the individual un.masks deeper psychological processes--processes that are always operating but are usually obscured by surface mental activity. Often, people who arrive at this deepened state have no later memory of their actions while they were in it.

While there, they can produce a variety of "trance" phenomena if guided by another person with whom they are in rapport. Among these are: (1) the retrieval of long-forgotten memories, (2) insensitivity to pain, and (3) positive and negative hallucinations (e.g., seeing a suggested object that is not really present; not seeing a suggested object that really is present).

It is also characteristic of this state that the deeper, now-dominant processes will attempt to devise a compatible response to whatever task is presented. If the entranced person is asked to raise the temperature of his hand, its blood vessels will likely dilate.

If a difficult question is posed, an answer will be constructed from the person's life repository of conscious and subliminal experiences. The answer's validity will depend on the quality, breadth, and depth of the inventory of his mental storehouse. At times, the person will provide a sophisticated answer that was unknown to him when awake.

How are we to account for this extraordinary behavior? Here is one explanation. Our brains are pre-wired to perform a number of information-generating operations. These have great survival value. They include: association, comparison, classification (by difference and similarity), inference (by deduction and induction), analysis and synthesis, logical ordering, reconciliation, simplification, representation (via symbol, analogy, and metaphor), and evolution toward optimization.

Usually this processing is carried out subliminally and over time, and we are only aware of the results. In a trance state, however, we temporarily eliminate the impediment that wakeful attention imposes on mental processing. Energy that was previously expended to monitor the outer world is now reallocated to the information-generating operations of the inner world. From this perspective, the hitherto unknown answer is a discovery worked out by the unconscious under highly favorable conditions.

Anyone who has had the experience of making a discovery can testify that one second you are clueless and the next second, with no conscious effort, YOU KNOW! This knowing is an outcropping of the unconscious mind.

A compelling issue is the extent to which the mental phenomena produced by your friend and others are utilizable for some productive end. This is what interests me, and I've spent my life trying to find out. In the process, I located the papers of the great but little-known psychologist and inventor Elmer Gates (1859-1923) and secured their preservation in the Smithsonian Institution. Gates discovered, tested, and validated an introspective method for bringing the deeper processes of invention to the surface of the mind while remaining fully awake. There is a short essay that outlines his method at the Smithsonian's Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation:

http://invention.smithsonian.org/resources/online_articles_detail.aspx?id=557