

There are many myths and misconceptions about the unconscious mind and its capabilities in determining our lives. One of the ways I explain the unconscious to people is as follows:

One of the first things which should be understood is that there is only one mind but with many different processes. Some of these processes occur within conscious awareness. For example, what are you thinking right now? Your cognitions are one process. What are you feeling right now? Your feelings are another process. During a relatively normal day there are many conscious processes occurring in our being. The conscious process can be thought of as arising from the unconscious. It derives from neural firings, chemical interactions and complex relationships with the mind.

But the unconscious isn't a separate mind, rather it is a set of processes which occur outside of conscious awareness. Sigmund Freud famously used the metaphor of an iceberg to describe our minds. The tip of the iceberg which is visible represents our conscious mind. The rest and larger part of the iceberg which is under water and therefore not readily visible represents the unconscious mind.



Iceberg Unconscious

While there is only one mind, it is often easier to talk as if there are two minds. You may well hear someone (including myself) use the terms conscious mind or unconscious mind. And that's fine because often we might want to make a broad distinction between the conscious and unconscious mind. Often, we are dealing with multiple and intricate things occurring at one time in our minds. We can simultaneously be operating on a conscious premise and multiple unconscious premises. I may well use the term conscious mind and

unconscious minds, but when I do it is more to make a distinction between two processes than a reality of two separate minds.

One of the biggest misconceptions about the conscious and unconscious is where the seat of power resides. As human beings we are largely driven by unconscious processes. Consider the following experiment as an illustration of the power of the unconscious.

An experimenter sets up a pair of realistic looking dummy legs. By using cameras and mirrors, the dummy legs become a realistic illusion. In the illusion the dummy legs look like real legs belonging to the person. If we go to injure the dummy legs, the mind reacts as if the real legs are about to be injured. This occurs even though the person consciously knows that it is an illusion and that their real legs are not being injured. The take away is that conscious knowing does not overwrite the unconscious mind.

Here is another example from my own life. Several years ago, I was in hospital and while there had not slept for a few days. I asked the nurse for a sleeping pill and she said she would ask the doctor for one. She came back later holding a pill in her hand and started to give me an explanation as to how the pill worked. It occurred to me that she was lying, and I blurted out, the pill is a placebo. Her subsequent reaction confirmed my hunch but as people often do, she persisted with the pretence. I took the pill knowing full well it was a placebo and even recall tasting the sugar (placebos often are sugar pills). Despite knowing it was a placebo I fell asleep within the next 20 minutes.

And that is consistent with what science knows about placebos. Placebos can and often do work even though the person knows it's a placebo. The act of taking a pill to cure our ills has been so deeply embedded in our psyche, that the act itself acts as the placebo, even though the pill has no beneficial properties to it. Our unconscious beliefs seem to take precedence over conscious knowing. There are numerous experiments which demonstrate this same range of phenomena and its well worth the time to read up on how our unconscious often determines our behaviour. So, of what use is the conscious mind?

The conscious process serves two main purposes. One is to tell ourselves a narrative, a story. E.g. today I am going to wear red socks. The unconscious decides this, but the conscious makes believes it has decided. It tells us a story of us as being the conscious agents of our lives. In fact, it has been shown that anywhere between 0.4 seconds and 8 seconds before we are aware of any conscious decision, unconscious processes have already decided that outcome. That is something really thinking long and hard about. We are no where near as in control of our lives as we would like to think, but by the same token we are also not completely helpless.

The other important function which seems to occur at a conscious level is that it highlights things by placing attention on them. A metaphor I often use is that of a light beaming from a lighthouse. The light streaming from the lighthouse is our conscious process. It is a way of designating attention. For instance, the first step in healing from psychological injury is to recognize that there is a problem. The two main ways a person recognizes that there is a problem is 1. Acute distress where we cannot ignore that something is amiss and 2. When we make the same mistake repeatedly until it begins to dawn on us that something is awry.

The task in life is to get the ducks to all line up in row. Both our conscious and unconscious processes must be on the same page. This is how things are achieved and how we can move towards our goals.

Most people have misaligned processes. Often it is like different aspects of being are fighting towards different ends. We may well want to succeed in an endeavour but find ourselves sabotaging our own efforts towards this end.

Most of what we believe to be our actual choices are decided outside of conscious volition. For real change to occur we must understand and then work with our unconscious processes. Our efforts should go towards developing a relationship with the unconscious. Often this means looking in earnest at how we operate in the world. Looking at where we have mismatches in life is revealing and often contains a rich vein worthy of exploration. For instance, if we consciously want a rewarding and healthy relationship with someone, but continually find ourselves with the 'wrong person' that's the sort of mismatch worth looking at.

Our minds must be clear, concise and relatively free of negativity. This is not to be confused with stopping or stilling the mind. The clearness is simply removing all the obstacles, blockages, poor life lessons, beliefs etc. that get in the way of what we want to achieve. That is one part of the equation. Another part of the equation is to integrate things like integration or creativity into our lives. And yet another is to pay attention to our dreams, our fantasies, our synchronicities. Paying attention to our resistances and defence mechanisms, learning our habits and patterns are another facet worthy of exploration. The well of the unconscious runs deep.

Understanding the unconscious is a big undertaking. The unconscious uses symbols, metaphors, synchronicities as its primary mode of communication. It does not employ rational linear thinking in the same way that our conscious processes do. This is partly why it is often difficult to appreciate and understand the unconscious. It is difficult but rewarding work if we persist. But be clear that there is no such thing as a weekend

workshop where we come away knowing all the ins and outs of the unconscious. To understand and then utilize the unconscious is a life's work and then some... But the rewards can be like precious jewels.

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