

Automatic Brain: The Magic of the Unconscious Mind

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › “Automatic Brain: The Magic of the Unconscious” is a fascinating documentary centered around the belief that your subconscious mind manages about 90% of everything you do whether you are asleep or awake
- › To get an idea of the scope of influence your unconscious mind has over your life, think about brushing your teeth or even driving, and how often you perform those and other routine tasks without being fully conscious of them
- › As research progresses, scientists are realizing that many functions previously thought to be conscious are actually unconsciously driven
- › Your unconscious mind, in part, needs specific direction, is most comfortable with emotions and symbols, deals with positives only and stores, organizes and surfaces your memories
- › Expressing yourself artistically, meditating, rehearsing desired outcomes and using positive self-talk are some of the ways you can begin to harness the power of your unconscious mind

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"Automatic Brain: The Magic of the Unconscious Mind" is a fascinating first segment of a two-part documentary about the brain. The 52-minute film is based on the belief that your subconscious mind manages about 90% of everything you do whether you are asleep or awake. Through a series of interviews and entertaining demonstrations,

neuroscientists and magicians team up to explain – and vividly demonstrate – the relationship between your conscious and unconscious brain.

You may be surprised to discover your conscious mind plays only a minor role in guiding your life. In fact, most of what you think, say and do every day is a function of your "automatic," or unconscious brain (also known as your subconscious). As such, much of the time, your brain is running your life on autopilot.

For example, think about brushing your teeth or even driving, and how often you perform those and other routine tasks without being fully conscious of them. The movie is seasoned with plenty of sleight of hand tricks and visual experiments designed to both educate and entertain you. If you have children at home, you might want to share some of the trick segments with them.

Watching with others or alone, I think you will benefit from taking a closer look at the inner workings of your brain.

What Do Scientists Know About the Unconscious Mind?

Given that your brain weighs just 3 pounds and has been the subject of countless scientific studies, you might think we've already learned all we can about it. To the contrary, the brain is remarkably complex and we have much, much more to discover. This film suggests your unconscious mind drives most of your daily routines and habits.

"The brain decides things before we can consciously think about it," says Allan Snyder, director of the University of Sydney's Center for the Mind. "Decisions are almost dictated to us." For starters, consider how your brain can handle this mixed-up sentence: "Wyh sohuld yuo wach tihs flim atbou yoru barin?"

Without much effort or conscious thought, your brain fills in the gaps of perception, enabling you to understand the question to be: "Why should you watch this film about your brain?" Psychology professor John Bargh, Ph.D., founder of the automaticity in cognition, motivation and evaluation laboratory at Yale University, suggests the

unconscious mind is asserting itself more and more as researchers continue to study the human brain. He states:

"Unconscious influences are ... everywhere, and as research progresses, it's never going the other way. We're not saying 'Oh, we used to think these things were all unconscious, but now we find out they're conscious.' It's exactly the opposite. All these things we thought [were conscious] – because we thought everything was conscious – [are getting] smaller and smaller."

Matt James, Ph.D., owner of Empowerment, Inc. and master trainer of neuro linguistic programming, writing in Psychology Today, assigns seven qualities to your unconscious brain. These qualities may help you understand the vital role your subconscious plays in orchestrating a significant portion of your life. Your unconscious brain, says James:¹

Acts like a young child – Similar to a young child, your unconscious mind needs clear, detailed directions and it takes instructions literally. This means you may experience neck pain at work if you are prone to saying, "This job is a pain in the neck!" If you want to be successful, you must give your unconscious mind specific, literal (and positive) instructions to follow.

Communicates through emotion and symbols – Your unconscious mind can get your attention quickly by using feelings and symbols. If you are suddenly overcome with fear, for example, your unconscious mind has discerned (correctly or incorrectly) that your survival may be at risk.

Deals with positives only – Negative words like "don't," "no" or "not" are largely ignored by your unconscious mind. For this reason, it is better to avoid statements like "I don't want to procrastinate," which very likely will result in your subconscious creating a picture of procrastination and drawing you toward that behavior.

It would be better to state your intention in a positive form such as "I am going to tackle the project now." Creative imaging is another way to settle your mind on positive thoughts.

Makes associations and learns quickly — To protect you, your unconscious mind is always on alert, gleaning lessons from every experience you have. One bad experience in the classroom at school might translate into a core belief that anything related to education "won't be fun," causing you to become anxious whenever you have to try something new in an academic setting.

If you do well in sports, though, your subconscious will note that "sports equals success" and you will feel energized and positive whenever physical activity is called for at school.

(This may explain why so many school-aged children claim lunch or recess as his/her favorite subjects. This is likely because lunch and recess have more possibilities for success and, therefore, more positive associations than some of the other activities taking place during the school day.)

Preserves your body — Because a primary objective of your subconscious is the survival of your physical body, it will fight anything that appears to be a risk or threat of hurting you.

Runs your body — Since your unconscious mind is responsible for your basic physical functions, such as breathing, heart rate and immune function, it can be an excellent source of information regarding what your body needs and how it can achieve optimal health. When people tell you to "listen to your body," it is actually your unconscious mind you need to tap into.

Stores and organizes your memories — Your subconscious determines where and how to store your memories. It also decides whether to hide unpleasant emotions and trauma from your conscious mind or bring it to the surface so you can deal with it.

As such, it is also in charge of determining the timing for certain memories to surface. Even if you don't feel ready to deal with something — like unresolved aspects of your past, including trauma — your unconscious mind knows when you are ready.

Magic Tricks Work by Cleverly Manipulating Your Unconscious Mind

Magician Apollo Robbins, known as "the gentleman thief," who first made national news as the man who pick-pocketed a Secret Service agent while entertaining former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, is well-known for exploiting the automatic mode your brain uses to navigate you through life. About magic, Robbins said:

"Magic is about what's happening inside the head. It's about how we can manipulate the attention. It's about how [the unconscious mind] can be taken advantage of ... to take people on a journey."

When Robbins performs a sleight of hand trick to make a coin disappear in one place and mysteriously appear in another, he says the trick works because your automatic brain makes a false assumption about his hand. For example, Robbins could easily make you think the coin is moving from place to place simply by distracting your attention.

By inviting your conscious brain to focus on one particular area, Robbins can quickly make changes in another, giving the appearance of something magical transpiring.

In scientific terms, Stephen Macknik, Ph.D., professor, neuroscientist, author and columnist at the State University of New York, explains what you experience during a magic trick is a series of "electrochemical signals going around a bunch of circuits in your brain." Because there are no windows in your skull, he says, the only way you can get information into your brain is through your five senses.

From there, your brain draws on past memories and then uses cognition to fill in the details – essentially forming what Macknik calls "a grand simulation of reality." He states: "It's not that the world around you isn't there. It's there, but you've never lived there. You've never even been there for a visit. The only place you've ever been is inside your mind."

Overloading Your Working Memory Is Part of Creating an Illusion

Many tricks performed by magicians work on the principle that your mind can cope with no more than four to five units of information at the same time. As such, when asked to choose and focus on one particular card out of a group of six cards, you will very likely take little notice of the other five cards. Let's say you chose the king of hearts.

As the trick advances, you will eventually notice the king of hearts has disappeared from the group of six, which gives you the false impression the magician has successfully identified your card.

The truth is, he may have simply shown you a group of six entirely new cards. As such, regardless of the card you chose earlier on, it would not have appeared in the final sequence, leading you to believe the illusionist did something magical to uncover your card. In reality, the magician did very little to identify your card. All he did was cleverly manipulate your unconscious brain to support a "magical" outcome.

Because your brain's working memory was overloaded, it did not notice the wholesale change of the cards.

The Marshmallow Test and the Unconscious Mind

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers from Stanford University initiated the "marshmallow test" at Bing Nursery School near San Francisco to explore how the conscious mind can subdue the unconscious mind. Repeated in the film, this experiment endures as one of the most important tests related to self-control and motivation. It involves seating a 4-year-old child in front of a table on which has been placed a plate with one marshmallow and a small hand bell.

Before a trusted adult leaves the room to "take care of something," he invites the child to choose if he/she would like to receive a second marshmallow, which is produced from a package of marshmallows the adult has on hand. To earn the second marshmallow, prior to the adult's return, the child is told he/she must avoid doing the following:

- Eating the first marshmallow
- Ringing the bell to summon the adult to return earlier than planned

Over the years this test has been used, it is evident each child had previously developed his/her personal strategy to resist temptation and exercise self-control well before participating in the experiment. As such, participant brains were effectively on autopilot during the test, which would suggest the outcomes had very little to do with situational willpower. The late Walter Mischel, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Columbia University and hailed inventor of the marshmallow test, said:

"The conception of willpower as a stoic thing, where you essentially bite your lip, will it and make it happen. [This] is a terrific way to have resolutions that don't work out. It's just too hard, it's just too impossible. You have to in some way engage the environment, change it and transform it. The only other thing you can do [to overcome temptation] is change your perceptions, and change where you put your attention."

The children who waited for the adult to return on his own were shown to be successful in redirecting themselves to other activities while they were waiting. These other activities apparently helped them overcome temptation by choosing to distract or redirect their focus away from the marshmallow. "Four-year-olds can be brilliantly imaginative about distracting themselves: turning their toes into piano keyboards, singing little songs, exploring their nasal orifices," stated Mischel.²

Your Ability to Exercise Self-Control at Age 4 Influences Your Adult Life

Notably, researchers have kept tabs on the original children who participated in the marshmallow test in the early 1970s. Through ongoing interviews, scientists have found that compared to subjects who immediately devoured the marshmallow, those who at the age of 4 were able to wait, went on to:

- Achieve higher scores on college entry exams³

- Earn significantly more money
- Experience happier marriages
- Maintain a lower body mass index (BMI)⁴

Related to BMI, researchers noted that each additional minute the preschooler delayed gratification predicted a 0.2-point reduction in adult BMI. The study authors stated:⁵

"Longer delay of gratification at age 4 years was associated with a lower BMI three decades later. Identifying children with greater difficulty in delaying gratification could help detect children at risk of becoming overweight or obese. Interventions that improve self-control in young children have been developed and might reduce children's risk of becoming overweight."

Six Actions You Can Take to Harness Your Unconscious Mind

Clearly, as the producers of "Automatic Brain" assert, your unconscious mind has a strong, powerful influence in your life. For obvious reasons, you want to harness its power and direct its influence in positive, life-giving ways. Operation Meditation suggests six actions you can take to more fully leverage and direct the potential of your unconscious mind:⁶

Express yourself artistically — Any type of artistic endeavors, like coloring, drawing or painting, makes use of the subconscious by allowing the creative work to surface and help you express your true feelings. If you are unsure how to get started, you might consider taking an art class, even if you have little artistic talent or interest.

Because the goal is to tap into your subconscious mind, you don't necessarily need to be a great artist, just open to the process of creating.

Meditate — Of all of the ways to connect with and influence your subconscious mind, meditation may be the most powerful. During meditation, you are becoming more relaxed, thereby setting aside conscious thinking. In a relaxed, open-minded state,

you are able to access deeper feelings and thoughts that are normally suppressed. (See below for details on mindfulness, a form of meditation.)

Rehearse desired outcomes – A great way to program a new activity, skill or thought into your unconscious mind is to rehearse it and repeat it until it takes root. Countless songs are lodged in your subconscious, and you can sing them mindlessly, simply because you repeated them at some earlier point in your life.

Similarly, you can rehearse new attitudes, ideas, outcomes and thoughts. By repeating what you want several times in a row on a daily basis, you will help your subconscious mind catch on and help you achieve your desired outcomes.

Review before bed – Especially as it relates to learning new material, reviewing it just before you go to sleep may help you transfer it to your subconscious. Reading over key portions of goals, presentations or speeches as the last thing you do before bed ensures the information is in the forefront of your mind as you drift off to sleep. This technique also has the potential to influence the content of your dreams.

Think and speak positively – Speaking out positive affirmations is a great way to plant positive thoughts and ideas into your unconscious mind. By adopting a consistent habit of positive "self-talk," you will notice more upbeat thoughts beginning to gradually counteract previously negative thinking.

Starting with simple phrases such as "I can do this" or "I am doing a fantastic job" will lift your spirits and begin to influence how you think and feel about yourself, even if others around you continue to criticize and be negative. As mentioned earlier, avoid using negative phraseology such as "I won't use harsh words." Instead, rephrase the thought into a positive form such as, "I will speak only kind, encouraging words."

Write it down – Getting your thoughts down on paper can help you remove "mind clutter." Take out a pad of paper and a pen, set a timer for five to 10 minutes and begin writing whatever comes to mind. Avoid editing yourself.

Write literally anything and everything that comes to mind. Over time, as you stick with this habit – ideally as a weekly and even daily activity – your brain will work its way into your subconscious, uncovering and surfacing valuable insights and thoughts you may not have even realized you had. If you are in the habit of keeping a diary or journal, you probably already experience the many benefits related to this practice.

Practicing Mindfulness: Another Means of Training Your Mind

Mindfulness is a form of meditation, and you can practice it anytime, anywhere. To do so, you simply choose to actively pay attention to the moment you're in right now with a nonjudgmental attitude.

Instead of letting your mind wander, when mindful, you live in the present moment, letting any distracting thoughts and judgments pass through your mind without getting caught up in emotional implications and negativity, which have the potential to distract you and pull you away from the here and now.

A great advantage of mindfulness is the ease with which you can incorporate it into any aspect of your day. You can employ mindfulness while you're doing household chores like washing dishes, when you are eating, going for a walk or working. The goal is to simply pay attention to the sensations you are experiencing in the present moment.

According to [The Atlantic](#),⁷ many school teachers are now beginning their classes with short mindfulness exercises involving activities such as counting breaths, focusing on the sensations of breathing, and visualizing thoughts and feelings. The goal is to help students prepare for academic lectures and lessons by:

- Focusing and training their attention
- Quieting their thoughts
- Regulating their emotions

Mindfulness in Medicine

Mindfulness, especially the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, has also made its way into medical settings. For example, MBSR uses specific exercises to support patients who are dealing with chronic pain. In recent years, mindfulness has been used to ease stress on Capitol Hill,⁸ boost athletic and business performance for the Seattle Seahawks⁹ and Google,¹⁰ respectively, and drive results in the U.S. military.¹¹

While the move toward mindfulness has spurred an industry involved in the promotion of all sorts of books, courses, magazines and smartphone apps, you can bring mindfulness into your everyday world without any special equipment or training. Here are some tips to help you get started:

- **Begin your day mindfully by focusing on your breathing for five minutes before you get out of bed. Tune in to the flow of your breath and the rise and fall of your belly. By regulating your breathing first thing after you wake up, you can bring more clarity and focus to the rest of your day.**
- **Minimize multitasking, which works in direct opposition to mindfulness. If you find yourself trying to complete many tasks at once, stop yourself and focus your attention back to the one task at hand.**
- **Disable emotionally distracting thoughts by reminding yourself they are only "projections," not a guaranteed future reality. As such, you can allow those thoughts to pass rather than giving them permission to stress you out.**
- **Sit quietly for a time, perhaps in the company of soothing music. Breathe rhythmically, and focus on something such as your breathing, a soothing image or object, a breath prayer or mantra or simply being aware of the present moment. Applying Buteyko breathing can also help calm your mind and get you into deep states of relaxation at any time during the day.**

Whatever method you choose to become more aware of and engaged with your brain will most certainly pay dividends across your entire life — physically, emotionally and spiritually. Your mind is powerful and, as the producers of "Automatic Brain" have suggested, you are very likely only connected to and leveraging a very small portion of all the wonderful benefits your brain has to offer.

Sources and References

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