

Why Reality Testing Is Important

We are bombarded by information from the outside world. As children, we learnt how to identify information which is important and to tune into it. A good example of this is the Cocktail Party Effect. If you are at a party and someone halfway across the room drops your name into their conversation, you hear what they say even though you weren't consciously aware of monitoring them.

We also abstract information from our memories unconsciously, often prompted by cues in the present. This is how we make sense of the world. We perceive events and people and then we construct a model of what we have perceived, putting it away in memory for future reference. Through the act of imagination we are able to experience things in the outside world even when they are not actually present. For example we can have imaginary conversations in our heads finding answers we wouldn't be able to find by asking ourselves.

The process of perception is largely unconscious. If we were aware of what was going on when we bought a name to mind, or chose to attend to one thing over another, we would be constantly distracted by how we were perceiving rather than attending to what we were perceiving.

The problem with seamless, unconscious perception is that we access the information but don't always know the source. When we talk with someone and the sounds of their speech don't all make it into our ears, we fill in the gaps just like the predictive text messaging systems on mobile phones. To do this we draw on memory. We remember what words are possible in our language; what sorts of words the person we are listening to uses, and so on. We also draw on memories of other people who were roughly similar to the speaker. More often than we realise, we are seeing and hearing information from our past without even noticing it. This is why we are so prey to illusions. When you see a magician perform an illusion, and you know how it is done, you wonder why other people can't see it. They can't see it because the magician manipulates them to see what they expect to see.

Psychotherapists call the process of transposing memories from the past onto the present projection. When people come to us unhappy with how they relate to people, one of our first strategies is to help the person notice how much they are projecting. We tend to say that it's a good thing for people to check their present reality rather than live in the world they create from imagination and memory. Of course, for all the people who are projecting negative past experiences onto present relationships, there must be some who are projecting past positive experiences when the present reality is not so good. Hmmm, let's not think too much about that!

© ADAM MAY, MA (Hons), ADHP (NC), MNRHP, UKCP Reg, 2 Fron Heulog, Llanddaniel
Fab, Gaerwen, Sir Fôn, LL60 6EP.
Phone. 01248 421015. e mail: adam@adammay.co.uk

Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

This article was first printed in Network News