

Why Your Unconscious Mind Is A Bit Like My Back Bedroom (or Why It's Good To Talk)

My back bedroom is full of stuff. I say "stuff" because many of the items defy categorisation and that's why they are there. "Kitchen" things are to be found in the kitchen. "Tools" in the toolbox. Easy. But what about unwanted gifts, clothes that I'll never wear but are too good to throw away, Christmas decorations, household appliances awaiting repair, and, of course, papers: newspapers, old diaries, old bills, instruction booklets, and old correspondence? Well that's what's in my back room. There is another class of things in that backroom too: those things I don't want to have to think about. There are items that connect me with parts of my past I would like to forget; there are objects that belong to unfinished projects; and things I am looking after for other people.

Your unconscious mind is like that too.

Freud argued that we put some material into the unconscious part of our mind because we can't bear to confront it, and that we then deceive ourselves by forgetting it's there. There may be some truth in this theory, but I think most of us can face most of what lies in our unconscious but we choose not to because nobody enjoys spring-cleaning. Instead we just open the door and throw in something else telling ourselves that we'll sort out the mess when we have a moment. Back bedrooms have limited capacity though. The knowledge that there are things that need tidying and sorting often leaves one feeling unsettled and unable to relax.

Every now and then a crisis comes along and forces us into that back room for some resource, some memory, that we know will help. As we pull out that one thing, sometimes a number of other things that are tangled up with it get pulled out. This isn't necessarily a bad thing because it means those things are dealt with too.

This is why there is no "just" about the sort of talking people do in psychotherapy. This sort of talking often involves taking the unseen thoughts and memories which lie in the unconscious, that back bedroom behind our eyes, and putting them out in the space between us and another person where it can be seen, thought about, and sorted out. After being examined, maybe we'll want to put the thoughts and memories somewhere else, or maybe we will put them back, but if we do put them back, we'll put them back more tidily, and we'll know they are there so they won't trouble us in quite the way they did before when they were sensed but unseen.

How tidy is your back bedroom?

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.

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