



# Who Are You?

By Annette Poizner, Ed.D., RSW

Here's some news for you: you may not be who you think you are. Here's why. You have a conscious mind and an unconscious mind. Your conscious mind is the homebase of rational thought and many of the transient feelings you'll experience throughout the day. When someone speaks to you, the one that answers is the conscious mind. We always and necessarily have a strong attachment to this part of the mind because it feels like who we really are. At the same time, we know there's an unconscious mind, the part that manufactures dreams at night. It often feels like the conscious mind runs the show and the unconscious mind is a bit player; as if we are 99 percent conscious, 1 percent unconscious.

Interestingly, the exact reverse is true. The unconscious nicely runs your physiology, quietly making adjustments as needed, always out of conscious awareness. It is the storehouse of all your memories and skill sets. It is the homebase of intuition and it may have a style that is distinctively different from your own. Your conscious mind might be intense, focused and fixated on worries but the unconscious mind, when it's in its healthiest and most preferred state, is unfettered by transient



thoughts and emotions. It thrives in the state of stillness and endows us with a feeling of centeredness. The unconscious reigns supreme at night when everything calms down in our external environment. It does its best work without competing distractions.

Here's a maxim you ought to remember. When people are anxious, they forget what they know. With enough fear or panic, the unconscious shuts down, to some extent. People quite literally lose their memory, forgetting skills, information and even the most familiar data like frequently used phone numbers. People who are chronically anxious often become dependent on others to remind them of their own strengths and abilities. Imagine having an amnesia where you forget all that you can do effectively. There is an amplified sense of danger associated with being in the world. The cure is to help such a person learn how to quell the fright and cultivate a sense of calm. The more they do so, the more they can retrieve their own resources and remember their own now accessible knowledge base.

The best way to help the unconscious mind to flourish is to create an internal climate which most graciously hosts this deeper and more essential self. People who engage in spiritual practices or study, whether it's through meditation, tai chi or Torah study, are nourishing the inner mind with the kind of activities and ideas that help it thrive. Because the conscious mind is quick to take control and fix attention on practical matters or external pressures, it takes a certain discipline to develop the ability to step back and recalibrate; to loosen the muscles, to take some deep breaths and clear the mind. The more we tighten up, the more we fluster and unsettle the unconscious, the less access we have to that unconscious and the less confident and grounded we will feel as a result. All of this making us even more vulnerable to worries and stress.

Building the unconscious is not unlike fitness training. If you invest time and effort in developing this inner faculty, it will serve you better when life's inevitable stresses arise. There are audiotapes at the public library which have breathing exercises and guided meditations that you can listen to. Several years ago, I borrowed a few of these tapes and

used a different one each day. At the end of three months, I noticed that I had better, cleaner concentration with less mental chatter. Also, my breathing had become noticeably deeper and slower. Even without undertaking a formal program, you can still gain benefits from taking frequent short breaks in each day to stretch, to take a few deep breaths and offer the inner mind a moment of respite from the fast pace that characterizes our lives.

Hypnosis is another modality that helps the unconscious mind to flourish. Many people seek hypnosis in order to get suggestions implanted that will help break a habit such as nail biting or an addiction such as cigarette smoking. I would suggest that hypnosis offers the unconscious mind new opportunities to learn but more importantly it trains the conscious mind to recede, shutting down worries and distracting thoughts, so that the unconscious mind can emerge to share a deeper more sustaining experience of self.

If you devote a little bit of time and effort to developing your inner mind, you'll get noticeable benefits in return: less road rage, less emotional reactivity and less stress. The more we learn to inhabit the space of the inner mind, the more we will become who we really are, and the more comfortable we will tolerate the losses that always accrue with the process of aging. There's just no downside to this one. So conscious mind, move over. I'd like you to meet your better half...

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