

A glowing, ethereal face in the background, appearing as a bright, hazy light source with a human-like shape, set against a dark background.

Paranormality

Why we see
what isn't
there

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FROM THE
AUTHOR OF

:59
SECONDS

The instant superhero kit

Introduction

I have put together a set of quick and quirky psychological demonstrations that you can use to impress your friends, family and colleagues. These demonstrations are based on the theories and ideas encountered in Paranormality, and will only take a few moments to learn. Together they form an 'instant superhero kit'. Enjoy.

The Reading

Chapter one examined how it is that psychics, mediums and astrologers appear to give highly accurate and impressive readings. It takes practice to master the psychological principles involved in a professional 'cold reading'. However, you can instantly use the following demonstration to convince complete strangers that you know all about them.

In the late 1940s psychologist Bertram Forer carried out a groundbreaking experiment in which he gave each of his students exactly the same personality description and discovered that almost all of them rated it as being highly accurate. This phenomenon, now known as 'The Barnum Effect', can be used to give the impression that you have a deep and mysterious insight into a stranger's personality.

To concoct a convincing cover story, first find out if the person you are trying to impress is into palmistry, astrology or psychology. Then look at their hand, ask for their date of birth, or have them draw a house, and recite the following...

I get the impression that you are a loyal and devoted friend – someone that people can rely on in times of difficulty. Although you are fair-minded, you are also a far more ambitious person than your friends and colleagues realize. Most of the time you give the impression of being strong, but deep down you sometimes worry about what the future will bring. You are the sort of person who endorses very general statements about themselves. (Just kidding. Sorry if you read that out.)

I have a feeling that in certain circumstances you can be something of a perfectionist¹, and that this sometimes annoys those around you. You

are good at seeing both sides of an argument rather than jumping to conclusions. You are the type of person that likes to gather together all of the facts and then make a decision. Is that right? When you look back on your life you sometimes dwell on what you might have done differently, but in general you focus on the future. Although you enjoy change and variety, you are also attracted to a sense of routine and stability. You are facing a significant decision right now, or have recently experienced a large change in your life. You know that you have considerable unused capacity that you have not turned to your advantage, and at times you are extroverted and sociable, while at other times you are far more introverted and reserved.

Science predicts that the stranger will be mightily impressed. That is, of course, unless they have also read Paranormality.

Instant anaesthetist

Chapter two delved deep into the science behind out-of-body experiences and discovered that these strange sensations provided a unique insight into how your brain figures out where 'you' are every moment of your waking life. Some of the research in this area has explored how your brain uses visual information to decide where 'you' are by conducting studies in which people feel as if a rubber hand, or even a tabletop, is part of them. This 'anaesthetized finger' demonstration is conceptually identical to these experiments. Ask a friend to extend their right index finger. Now, extend your left index finger and clasp your hands together so that your and your friend's index fingers touch along their length (see the photograph below).



Next, ask your friend to use the thumb and first finger of their left hand to stroke along the sides of this 'double finger'. Have them rub their left thumb along the front of their right index finger and their left index finger along the front of your left index finger. Something very strange will happen. Your friend

will feel as if their right index finger has become completely numb.

Your friend's brain sees what it believes to be their left index finger being stroked, but feels nothing, and decides that the finger must be numb. In addition to illustrating the innermost workings of the brain, this demonstration is great for chatting people up in bars.

The Suggestibility Test

Chapter four revealed how investigations into table-turning, the Ouija board and automatic writing led to the discovery of a form of unconscious movement known as 'ideomotor action'. Suggestible people are especially prone to the ideomotor action and you can use the following exercise to assess your friend's level of suggestibility.

Ask your friend to hold out their arms in front of them, ensuring that their arms are parallel to the ground and that both of their hands are face down and level. Now ask them to close their eyes while you read out the following paragraph, slowly and clearly:

I am going to take you through a simple visualization exercise. First of all, imagine a heavy stack of books being tied together with some thick string, and that the end of the string is attached to the fingers of your left hand. The books are hanging under your left hand and tugging down on your arm, pulling it towards the ground. Don't consciously move your hands, but instead just listen to my voice and let the images flow through your mind. Imagine the weight of the books gently pulling your left arm towards the ground, feeling heavier and heavier as time goes on. Now imagine a balloon filled with helium and attached to a thin thread. The end of the thread is tied to the fingers of your right hand and is gently pulling your hand into the air. The books are dragging your left hand down towards the ground and the balloon is pulling your right hand towards the ceiling. Don't consciously move

your hands, but instead just listen to my voice and let the images flow through your mind. Your left hand being pulled down and your right hand being pulled up. Excellent. Now open your eyes and relax your arms.

Look at the position of your friend's hands at the end of the exercise. The hands started at the same level. Has the left hand moved lower, and the right higher? If they are still level, or just a few inches apart, then the person is not especially suggestible. If the person's hands have moved more than a couple of inches apart then they are the more suggestible type. In addition to assessing their level of suggestibility, the test will also reveal an insight into their character. Non-suggestible types tend to be more down-to-earth, logical, and enjoy puzzles and games. In contrast, suggestible types tend to have a good imagination, be sensitive, intuitive, and find it easier to become absorbed in books and films.

Mind over matter

Chapter three investigated how those claiming to be able to move objects with the power of their mind reveal that you are only seeing a small fraction of what is actually taking place in front of your eyes. This important psychological principle is illustrated in the following two-part demonstration. All you need is a plastic straw, a plastic bottle and a table.

Seconds before you begin, secretly rub the straw on your clothing to ensure that it builds up a static charge. Next, carefully balance the straw horizontally across the top of a plastic bottle (see photograph below).



Announce that you seem to have acquired some very odd paranormal powers, place your right hand about an inch away from one end of the straw, and rub your fingers together. The straw will magically rotate on the bottle top, moving towards your fingers.

For the second part of the performance, place the straw on a tabletop a few inches from the edge of the table. The straw needs to be lying on its side and parallel to your body. Once again, rub the tips of your fingers together as if you are trying to summon your latent powers. Now place your right hand on the tabletop a few inches beyond the straw (see the photograph below).



Next, tilt your head down slightly as you focus your attention on the straw.

Slowly rub your fingers together and, at the same time, secretly blow towards the surface of the table. The air currents will travel along the table and move the straw.

Voilà, an instant miracle.

Using two different methods (static electricity and blowing) of obtaining the same effect is an important principle in faking mind over matter. Similarly, during the second part of the demonstration, people's attention is directed towards your fingers and away from your mouth, which also helps misdirect them away from the real source of the movement.

The Ritual

Chapter five ventured deep into the spooky world of ghosts and hauntings, and discovered how things that go bump in the night are actually due to the psychology of suggestion, a heightened sense of fear causing hyper-vigilance, and the brain's 'Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device'. Many people would love to experience a ghost, and this demonstration will convince your friends that you have the power to summon the spirits.

Ask your friend to stand about half a metre in front of a large mirror. Next, place a candle or other dim light directly behind them, and then turn off the lights. After about a minute of them gazing at their reflection, they will start to experience a strange illusion. According to work conducted by Italian psychologist Giovanni Caputo, about 70 per cent of people will see their face become horribly distorted, with many eventually seeing it contort into the face of another person. According to folklore, the effect is enhanced if your friend chants the words 'Bloody Mary' 13 times. Although researchers are not sure what produces the weird effect, it seems to be due to the procedure preventing your brain 'binding' together the different features of your face into a single image.

Finish the demonstration by explaining that it is quite likely that the spirits will now follow them home and give them terrible nightmares for a week (especially effective if their hands were far apart during the suggestibility test).

Control freak

Chapter six explored the world of mind control, revealing how remarkable displays of telepathy led to the discovery of muscle reading, and how the study of cult leaders revealed the power of persuasion. Starting a cult is probably not a very good idea. There are, however, a few fun ways in which you can appear to control your friend's behaviour.

First, ask your friend to clasp their hands together but to keep the index fingers of each hand extended, with a gap of about an inch between the two fingertips (see photograph below).



Next, announce that you are going to use the power of your mind to make their fingers drift together. Ask your friend to try as hard as they can to keep their index fingers apart, but to imagine a fine thread being wrapped around the ends, and the loop slowly tightening. You might find it helpful to mime the wrapping and tightening of the thread. After a few seconds your friend's muscles will become fatigued and their fingers will slowly drift together.

Second, ask your friend to place their right hand flat on a tabletop. Their thumb and fingers should be spread out and flat on the table. Ask them

to bend the second finger of their right hand inwards at the second joint and lay it against the table (see photograph below).



Announce that you will use your mental abilities to prevent them lifting the third finger of their right hand off the table. Try as they might, your friend will not be able to move their third finger.

I hope that you enjoy demonstrating your newfound superpowers and will use them as a force for good.
