



The Conscious, Subconscious, & Unconscious Mind How Does It All Work?

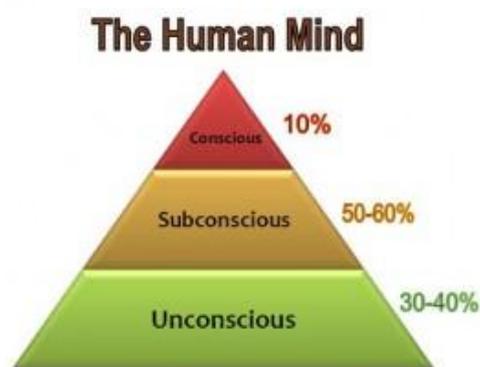
Just how does the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious mind work? And what is the difference between them?

In this article we'll have a look at how the three minds – conscious, subconscious, and unconscious – work together to create your reality... and how to use that knowledge to change your habits and create a happier, more peaceful and confident you.

A Walk Through the Human Mind

The concept of three levels of mind is nothing new. Sigmund Freud, the famous Austrian psychologist was probably the first to popularize it into mainstream society as we know it today. Even though his theories have subsequently been widely doubted in Psychology circles because they are very hard to scientifically prove, Freud nonetheless created a useful model of the mind, which he separated into 3 tiers or sections:

1. the conscious mind (or ego),
2. the preconscious, and
3. the unconscious mind.



The best way I have found to illustrate the concept of the three minds is by using a triangle. If you imagine at the very tip of the triangle is your conscious mind. It occupies only a small portion of space at the top, a bit like an iceberg where only a fraction of it is showing above the water. It probably represents about 10% of your brain capacity.

Below this is a slightly larger section that Freud called the preconscious, or what some refer to as the subconscious. It is much larger than the conscious mind and accounts for around 50-60% of your brain capabilities.

The section below this is the unconscious mind. It occupies the whole width of the base of the triangle and fills out the other 30-40% of the triangle. It is vast and deep and largely inaccessible to conscious thought, a bit like the dark depths of the ocean.

How They Work Together

Your conscious mind is what most people associate with who you are, because that is where most people live day to day. But it's by no means where all the action takes place.

Your conscious mind is a bit like the captain of a ship standing on the bridge giving out orders. In reality it's the crew in the engine room below deck (the subconscious and the deeper unconscious) that carry out the orders. The captain may be in charge of the ship and give the orders but it's the crew that actually guides the ship, all according to what *training* they had been given over the years to best do so.

The conscious mind communicates to the outside world and the inner self through speech, pictures, writing, physical movement, and thought.

The subconscious mind, on the other hand, is in charge of our recent memories, and is in continuous contact with the resources of the unconscious mind.

The unconscious mind is the storehouse of all memories and past experiences, both those that have been repressed through trauma and those that have simply been consciously forgotten and no longer important to us. It's from these memories and experiences that our beliefs, habits, and behaviors are formed.



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The unconscious constantly communicates with the conscious mind via our subconscious, and is what provides us with the meaning to all our interactions with the world, as filtered through your beliefs and habits. It communicates through feelings, emotions, imagination, sensations, and dreams.

The Mind in Action

The following analogy may help to clarify the concept of how the three minds work a little more.

If you imagine your mind is like a computer ...

Your conscious mind is best represented by the keyboard and monitor. Data is inputted on the keyboard and the results are thrown up on the monitor screen. That is how your conscious mind works – information is taken in via some outside (or internal) stimulus from your environment and the results are thrown up instantaneously into your consciousness.

Your subconscious is like the RAM in your computer. For those who don't know, RAM is the place in a computer where programs and data *that are currently in use* are kept so they can easily be reached quickly by the computer processor. It is much faster than other types of memory, such as the hard disk or CD-ROM.

Your subconscious works in the same way. Any recent memories are stored there for quick recall when needed, such as what your telephone number is or the name of a person you just met. It also holds your current programs that you run every day, such as your current recurring thoughts, behavior patterns, habits, and feelings.

Your unconscious is like the hard disk drive in your computer. It is the long term storage place for all your memories and programs that have been installed since birth.

Your unconscious mind (and finally your subconscious mind) then uses these programs to make sense of all the data you receive from the world and to keep you safe and ensure your survival. The logic of these two minds is that if it worked in the past and you survived, then it will help you get through similar situations by the same means, no matter how misguided, painful, and unhelpful the results may be to you personally in the outside world.

The Journey Begins

As mentioned, these sections and their functions have been hotly debated over the years by many other psychologists, philosophers, and scientists, because it's very hard to empirically prove they exist. Despite all this, I still find it a great analogy to use, and at the end of the day if it works for you and makes sense, then that's all that matters.

The Conscious Mind

If you ask most people to define what the conscious mind does you'll get varying answers. Some say what distinguishes it from the subconscious (or even the unconscious) is *awareness*.

But to say the subconscious is *unaware* is plain wrong. It has been well documented that you can be influenced by your surroundings or what people say even when your conscious mind is totally out of it, such as when you're under anesthetic or asleep. And what about when you drive to some destination but when you get there you have no memory of the trip. In those situations it's your subconscious that stays aware and performs the necessary functions.

Another argument people put forth is that the conscious mind is where you do all your thinking and logical reasoning. But that too doesn't entirely distinguish it from your subconscious or unconscious. Your unconscious minds are the storage place of all your memories, emotions and habits and are in fact very good at reasoning and logic.

Take, for example, when you were a baby. Your conscious mind had not yet developed enough to test and measure all the information from your environment, so at this age it sits in the background and it's your subconscious and unconscious that does all the data gathering and reasoning – identifying that the bottle or



nipple is a source of food, that crying gets you attention, that cuddles from mum means you are safe. In this stage it's your other two minds hard at work forming logical patterns of association (habits, beliefs, and emotions) that help you to survive.

By far the best explanation that I have found for the two most powerful functions your fully developed conscious mind can do that the other two can't is ...

1. Its ability to direct your focus.
2. Its ability to imagine that which is not real.

It's these two very important abilities that can change your life. Let's take a quick look at each ...

Directing Your Focus

While your subconscious mind has a much stronger sense of awareness of your surroundings than your conscious mind (some suggest it's where your "sixth sense" comes from) and is always switched on, even when asleep, it really does just obey orders from your conscious mind. If all you do is focus your conscious thoughts continually on negative things, then your subconscious will obediently deliver the feelings, emotions, and memories that you have associated with that type of thinking. And because those feelings will become your reality, you can then be caught up in a never ending loop of negativity, fear, and anxiety, constantly looking for the bad in every situation.

Take, for example, when you are laying in bed late at night and hear something go "bump" in the night. If you let your thoughts and *imagination* wander to all the horrible things that might happen, then your subconscious will throw up the feelings, emotions, and memories of past events that you've associated with those thoughts. It's your subconscious's way of protecting you and preparing you for fight or flight in those situations.

On the other hand, if you consciously tell yourself and direct your focus to more rational, calming thoughts, then the feelings will subside or disappear.

Some people find it quite easy and natural to direct their thoughts towards a more positive outlook on life and every situation. It really depends on the type of programming your subconscious and unconscious has had since birth. For example – do you sway towards pessimism or optimism, negative thinking or positive thinking, happiness or anger, or somewhere in between? Identifying which way you sway is the start to improving it.

This ability of your conscious mind to direct your attention and awareness is one of the *most important powers you have*, and to create change in your life you must learn to control what you consciously focus on.

But how do you do that? The actual skill of directing your focus is quite simple ... all it comes down to is making a choice. *Deciding* how you will think and what thoughts you will *allow* into your mind will determine your destiny. It can literally be used for good or evil, for constructive or destructive means.

Our mental thoughts are probably the only one true freedom we have in this world that we can actually control. A man can be physically trapped in prison in absolute inhumane conditions and yet still be free in his own mind – Victor Frankl and Nelson Mandela (among many others) are testament to that fact. We alone can choose how we are going to respond to our experiences in life.

Using Your Imagination

The other important ability of the conscious mind is the use of visualization. Your mind can literally imagine something that is totally new and unique – something you've never physically experienced before. By contrast, your subconscious can only offer versions of what memories it has stored of your past experiences.

But the really neat trick is that the subconscious can't distinguish between that which the conscious mind imagines and that which is real, so whatever is brought up by conscious imagination and intently focused on, also brings up all the emotions and feelings that are associated with that image in your mind for you to experience.



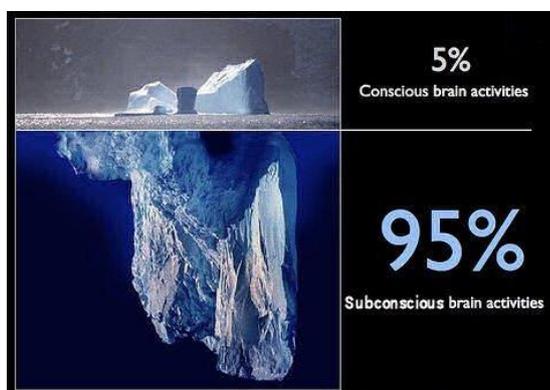
For example, if you've ever day dreamed before about winning lotto, or perhaps looked forward to being with that someone special you love, then you would have felt the joy that those thoughts had conjured up in your head, even though you knew intellectually it wasn't physically happening at that very moment. *But your subconscious thought it was happening to you*, and that's why it offered those feelings and emotions it associated with those thoughts. It truly is a marvelous gift we have!

Visualization can be used to create some amazing results. In one sporting study three groups of people were tested on their ability to improve their free throw accuracy in basketball. They were tested at the start of the experiment and at the end.

One group was instructed to physically practice free throws for 20 days in a row. The second group was not allowed to train at all. The third group spent 20 minutes a day getting into a relaxed state and only imagining themselves performing the free throws. They were also taught that if they missed in their minds, to adjust slightly and see themselves getting it the next time.

At the end of the experiment the results were incredible. The group that physically practiced each day improved their score by 24%. The second group who didn't practice understandably didn't improve at all. But the third group, who had only visualized doing it, *actually improved their score by an amazing 23% – nearly as much as group one!* Don't under estimate the power of the conscious mind.

The Sub- or pré conscious Mind



Your subconscious is the work desk of your mind. Controlling and directing it is the key to personal change.

As I said earlier, your subconscious is a bit like the RAM in your computer. (For those who don't know – RAM is the term used for the short term memory in a computer, and its job is to hold the programs and data that are *currently in use* so they can be reached quickly and easily by the computer processor. It's a lot faster than the other types of memory, such as the hard disk or CD-ROM.)

Your subconscious works in a similar way to computer RAM. It holds short term memory and current daily used programs.

The Role of the Sub- or pré conscious

Apart from short term memory, the subconscious also plays an important role in our day to day functioning.

It works hard at ensuring you have everything you need for quick recall and access to when you need it. Things like -

- Memories – such as what your telephone number is, how to drive a car without having to consciously think about it, what you need to get from the shop on the way home etc.
- Current programs you run daily, such as behaviors, habits, mood



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- Filters (such as beliefs and values) to run information through to test their validity according to your perception of the world
- Sensations taken in via your 5 senses and what it means to you

If it doesn't happen to have a filter or reference point in its RAM for some bits of information that come in, then it has a direct line to the storage place of the mind – the unconscious. It will ask the unconscious to pull out the programs that it best associates with the incoming data to help make sense of it all.

The subconscious is also constantly at work, staying a lot more aware of your surroundings than you realize. In fact, according to the NLP communication model we are assaulted with over 2 million bits of data *every second*. If your conscious mind had to deal with all that you would very quickly become overwhelmed and not be able to get anything done.

Instead, your subconscious filters out all the unnecessary information and delivers only that which is needed at the time, around 7 chunks/blocks of information. It does all this behind the scenes so you can perform your daily work uninhibited. And it does this as logically as it can, based on the programs it has access to in your unconscious.

And as discussed earlier in the article, it then communicates all the results into consciousness via emotions, feelings, sensations and reflexes, images and dreams. It doesn't communicate in words.

The link into the Subconscious

One of the truly great things about the subconscious (and one which we need to take advantage of to affect change) is ... *it obeys orders!*

People often erroneously think that the subconscious is in charge and you are merely at its mercy. In fact it's the complete opposite. Your conscious mind gives it the direction, the environment if you like, for which it operates in. The subconscious will only deliver the emotions and feelings of what you continuously think about.

Now I'm not saying it's as easy as changing what you think of in one moment and your entire life will be changed. In most cases your default programs have too much energy attached to them to change instantaneously. It can be done though – such as after a massive life altering event or if enough pain is associated with the old behavior – but without a major shift like that it is likely the old programs will reemerge.



The Unconscious Mind

The unconscious mind is very similar to the subconscious mind in that it also deals with memories. But there is a difference between the two.

If you remember the symbol of the triangle I used to describe the levels of the human mind, then you'll remember that the unconscious sits a layer deeper in the mind under the subconscious. Although the subconscious and unconscious have direct links to each other and deal with similar things, the unconscious mind is really the cellar, the underground library if you like, of all your memories, habits, and behaviors. It is the storehouse of all your deep seated emotions that have been programmed since birth. Actually it has everything to do with your early programming.

Out of their best intentions you got this programming by your parents, your ancestors, your family, culture, religion, masters in your life and first life experiences. Still now they form the voices in your head but actually are not your own voices. These voices make you develop your truth, your judging of what is good or bad for you and your labeling. Actually they only form a part of the whole truth because people from other cultures, as an example, can have another truth.

If you want significant change at a core level, then this is the place to work on ... but it's not easy to get to!

Unconscious versus Subconscious – What's the difference?

There's been plenty of debate over what is the correct term – subconscious or unconscious.

Unconscious is the term usually preferred by Psychologists and Psychiatrists to refer to the thoughts we have that are "out of reach" of our consciousness. It shouldn't be confused with the medical term for unconscious, which basically means knocked out or anesthetized, although both definitions do have similar qualities.

In simple terms, the unconscious is the storage place for all our memories that have been repressed or which we don't wish to recall. A traumatic event in our childhood that has been blocked out is an example, but it doesn't have to be so serious as this. It could be something very distant like what you had for lunch on your first day of school or what the name was of the childhood friend you played with a couple of times.

It's a memory that we can't pull out at our choosing. It's there, but we can't remember it no matter how hard we try. Certain psychoanalytical methods can bring back these memories (such as hypnosis) or it can be triggered by a particular event (a smell, a familiar place etc).

The important point to remember here, is that we cannot, by choice, remember anything in our unconscious without some special event or technique. This is the unconscious.

The subconscious, on the other hand, is almost the same, but the major difference is we *can* choose to remember. The memories are closer to the surface and more easily accessible with a little focus.

For example, if I were to ask you to remember what your phone number is, then you could easily bring that into conscious thought. The interesting thing is that before I asked you to recall it, you had no conscious thought of it at all. It was stored in your subconscious available for ready recall when needed, a bit like RAM in a computer because it's something that you require quite regularly to remember.

If, however, it wasn't important to you to recall your phone number that often then it may be stored a bit deeper, and as a result when you're asked for your phone number on the spot you might struggle to remember it.

The Role of the Unconscious

In many respects the unconscious deals with all the same tasks as the subconscious – memory, habits, feelings, emotions, and behaviors. The difference between the two minds, however, is that the unconscious is the *source* of all these programs that your subconscious uses



It is the place where all your memories and experiences since birth have been stored. It's from these memories that your beliefs, habits, and behaviors are formed and reinforced over time.

How to Change Your Life

If you want to affect change in your life at a core level then you will have to work on your programs that are held in the unconscious mind. There are specialized ways to make that happen. The place to start doing that is in the *conscious mind*.

By continuously being in charge of your own thoughts through directing your focus and using visualization, you can influence what programs the subconscious mind constantly runs. Do this often enough (and with enough emotional energy) then it will start to reprogram your unconscious internal representation and belief system.

And when that happens you'll experience change on a very deep level!

It's very much a top down approach. After all, it's how your habits, behaviors and beliefs were created in the first place. Give it a try and see how it works for you. And remember, enjoy the journey!

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