

UNDERSTANDING THE SUBCONSCIOUS

by

Edith Packer



A Publication of

The Jefferson School
of Philosophy, Economics, and Psychology

UNDERSTANDING THE SUBCONSCIOUS

I am going to speak to you today about the functioning of the subconscious mind, and how to begin to understand it. Specifically, I am going to focus on the role of the subconscious in the development and maintenance of psychological problems.

Before I get into the substance of my talk, I want to make a few preliminary remarks about my philosophical and psychological orientation, directed especially to those of you who are knowledgeable in psychology.

Philosophically, I view man as a rational being. Man's conscious mind and his free will are the basic tools for the achievement of mental health, values, and happiness. My psychological orientation can be described as Cognitive, as opposed to Behavioral, Existential, Freudian, or Gestalt. Central to this view is the idea that *all emotions are derived from some type of thought or cognition*, that emotions have no independent existence apart from the thoughts, conscious or subconscious, which underlie them. Thus, unlike other psychologists, who view psychological problems as emotional problems and confine disturbances in thinking to schizophrenia or psychosis, I view *all* emotional problems as disturbances in thinking, with their severity depending on the seriousness of the thinking mistakes involved and on whether or not the disturbances are subject to conscious control.

In assessing problems I am psychodynamically oriented, in that I take into consideration diverse factors which may have contributed to the development of psychological problems, such as physical factors, childhood and family influences, developmental problems, social, economic, and political aspects, etc.—in other words, the total context.

To understand my approach, it is essential that I give you a bird's eye view of how I conceptualize mental health and neurosis. Mental health, of course, depends on many factors, such as the possession of a rational conscious mind, good character, self-responsibility, and strong rational values. From the point of view of my focus today, however, I hope to show you that the essential characteristic of a mentally healthy person is *the ability to deal with a set of facts in any given context in the present without preconceived or hidden automated subconscious motivations*. And, in contrast, the essential characteristic of neurosis is the inappropriate expectation of injury in the present—that is, in a context in which there is no basis in reality for such expectation. I intend to show you that such inappropriate expectations of injury in the

present will result in inappropriate, painful, out-of-context emotions coupled with defensive behavior of some type.

Now I would like to begin by giving you two examples, which will focus our discussion:

1. Mr. Jones, a young, good looking, intelligent man, successful in his career, walks into a room full of people. He suddenly experiences extreme fear. He starts to sweat; his heartbeat increases. He realizes that he is experiencing the situation as in some way dangerous to him. He knows consciously that the people in the room will not harm him and that he is not in any danger. Yet he is unable to understand or control his incomprehensible fear.

2. Miss Smith, a young lady, comes to my office complaining of severe depression. She has been having a romantic relationship with a married man; the man has now decided to leave his wife, and wants to marry her. Miss Smith does not understand why, instead of being happy, she loses interest in the man and becomes depressed.

Now remember what I stressed about emotions: they are always based on some type of thought or evaluation. It is very obvious in my two examples that both the fear and the depression are not based on the *conscious* thoughts of the individuals. Mr. Jones does not consciously view the situation or the people in it as dangerous. Yet he is feeling fear. Miss Smith thinks that it is wonderful that the man is willing to leave his wife. Yet she is depressed. Do these examples, then, demonstrate a conflict between thoughts and emotions? Definitely not.

What the examples do demonstrate is that the emotions must be based on some type of subconscious beliefs and evaluations, which are presently unavailable to conscious awareness. Indeed, such examples are quite common. Most of my patients come into my office with the complaint that they do not understand certain of their feelings and behavior, which to them appear causeless.

In all these cases, when we understand the exact nature of the subconscious thoughts, the emotions become completely intelligible. More than that, when we identify and change the subconscious thoughts—to the extent that they were mistaken or irrational—the out-of-context emotions change.

As a critical first step in making such knowledge and change possible, I focus on a cluster of subconscious thoughts or conclusions which I call “core evaluations.” Core evaluations are operative in both of our examples, unknown to the two people and, as such, outside of their conscious control.

Core evaluations are basic conclusions, bottom-line evaluations, that we all hold subconsciously. These evaluations pertain to three fundamental areas of everyone’s life: self, reality, and other people. Some examples of core evaluations are: “I’m always on the outside looking in.” “People are such that sooner or later they will hurt me.” “Life is a power struggle, and, being weak,

UNDERSTANDING THE SUBCONSCIOUS

I will always be defeated.” “The real me is bad.” “Life does not hold the possibility of happiness for me.”

I’ve given you some mistaken core evaluations. Here are some correct ones: “People are not born good or bad. Each individual creates his own character and values. And that includes me.” “Values are achievable and happiness is possible.” “Life is an adventure.”

Correct core evaluations are ones which correspond to the fundamental facts of reality and as such provide an individual with a sound psychological framework for his development. By the same token, to the extent that a core evaluation is mistaken or irrational, it will cause and maintain psychological problems. I want to emphasize that such mistaken core evaluations are at the root of all defense mechanisms and most out-of-context emotions. They are at the base of all neurosis.

Accordingly, the main task of psychotherapy is to discover in each case what the person’s core evaluations are. And while the discovery of core evaluations is not by itself a cure, that discovery is the first step toward understanding the functioning of the patient’s subconscious. Thus, Mr. Jones and Miss Smith would have to understand their core evaluations in order to understand their out-of-context or contradictory emotions.

What are some further characteristics of core evaluations?

Core evaluations, whether correct or incorrect, operate as a complex, automated system or program in everyone’s psychology. They can be viewed as the psychological metaphysics of the person. They are held by each of us as, in effect, self-evidently true. Core evaluations influence every aspect of our method of thinking, the way we integrate reality in the present, and, ultimately, the way we behave.

Core evaluations are few in number—probably less than ten. In addition to core evaluations, of course, we also have many other psychologically important evaluations, which must be classified as mid-level or intermediate conclusions. The primary difference is that core evaluations are all-encompassing—metaphysical—while mid-level conclusions depend on core evaluations, are narrower, and are formed later. For example, Mr. Jones may discover in therapy that he is more afraid of the women present in the room than the men, and that he thinks of himself as unmasculine. Obviously, this is an important conclusion he has drawn about himself. Nevertheless, his masculine self-doubt is a relatively specialized self-appraisal, not basic or all-encompassing enough to be a core evaluation. A more basic conclusion which he may hold, which would qualify as a core evaluation, would be, for example, “I’m a weak person.”

Because they are fundamental, core evaluations are implicit in all lesser evaluations and influence the nature of those lesser evaluations. As in the saying “All roads lead to Rome,” so all evaluations lead to core evaluations.