

Human consciousness

Psychology



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BUSTER**

An unconscious person will die without constant care. Yet, as crucial as consciousness is, we can't really explain how it occurs. On the other hand, we can identify various states of consciousness and explore the role they play in our lives. This is especially true of sleep and dreaming, two states that psychologists have studied in detail. This first module introduces a number of altered states of consciousness and provides a guided tour of sleep and dreaming. To be conscious means to be aware. Consciousness consists of your sensations and perceptions of external events and your self-awareness of mental events including thoughts, memories, and feelings about your experiences and yourself. While this definition may seem obvious, it is based on your own subjective, first person experience. You are the expert on what it feels like to be you. What about other people? What does it feel like to be President Obama? Or your mother? And what about a dog? What runs through a dog's mind when it sniffs other dogs? Does it feel joy? You simply can't answer these questions about other minds through your own first-person perspective. The difficulty of knowing other minds is one reason why the early behaviorists distrusted introspection. Instead psychologists adopt an objective, third person point of view. A key challenge for psychology is to use objective studies of the brain and behavior to help us understand the mind and consciousness, which are basically private phenomena. The next few modules summarize some of what we have learned about different states of consciousness. We spend most of our lives in waking consciousness, a state of clear, organized alertness. In waking consciousness, we perceive times, places, and events as real, meaningful, and familiar. But states of consciousness related to fatigue, delirium, hypnosis, drugs, and euphoria may differ markedly from "normal"

awareness. Everyone experiences at least some altered states, such as sleep, dreaming, and daydreaming. Some people experience dramatically altered states, such as the lower levels of awareness associated with strokes and other forms of brain damage. In everyday life, changes in consciousness may even accompany long-distance running, listening to music, making love, or other circumstances. During an altered state of consciousness (ASC), changes occur in the quality and pattern of mental activity. Typically there are distinct shifts in our perceptions, emotions, memories, time sense, thoughts, feelings of self-control, and suggestibility. Definitions aside, most people know when they have experienced an ASC. In fact, heightened self-awareness is an important feature of many ASCs. In addition to the ones mentioned, we could add sensory overload, (a rave, Mardi Gras crowd, or mosh pit) monotonous stimulation, (such as "highway hypnotism" on long drives), unusual physical conditions, (high fever, hyperventilation, dehydration, sleep loss, near-death experiences) restricted sensory input, and many other possibilities. In some instances, altered states have important cultural meanings. 470 Words.