

THE FEAR FACTOR: DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

The way we see things depends not only on which way we're looking, but also on how 'open' our eyes are to what we see - this is true for a whole range of human experiences from physical to spiritual. Our personalities strongly influence how we react to both familiar and novel situations. We are guided by our previous emotional and intellectual experiences and their associated memories – they act like filters through which we view the world and guide how we attend to what's going on round about us.

But can we change the way we 'see' things, the value they have for us and how we subsequently react and behave? In the Lab Rats programme about fear, presenter Zeron Gibson spectacularly changed his 'emotional and intellectual viewpoints and value system' on worms, snakes and even managed to sleep with the enemy – in his case man-eating reticulated pythons!

In the following short experiment we explore how our memories, our imaginations, our emotions and our powers of attention can influence and bias our perspective of the world.

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the short story over the page.
Try to remember as much as you can about it.

The House On The Corner

The two boys ran until they came to the driveway. "See, I told you today was good for skipping school," said Mark. "Mum is never home on a Thursday," he added. Tall hedges hid the house from the road. The pair strolled across the front garden.

Before going inside Mark wanted to show Pete the outside laundry room, which was going to be converted into his own special playroom. It was a huge room with a high ceiling. The place smelt of stale air and dirty washing. It was gloomy and dusty and something wispy brushed his face as Pete walked through the connecting door to the garage. The garage looked as if it had been empty for years judging by the cobwebs hanging everywhere. "I'm hungry" said Pete, so they went on and let themselves into the house by a side door. Mark explained that it was left open in case his little sister got home earlier than their mother. Pete felt nervous now, but Mark said it was fine, and to prove his point insisted on showing him all round the house. They started in the living room. Much to Pete's alarm Mark turned on the stereo. "Don't worry, the nearest house is quarter of a mile away" shouted Mark. Pete felt more relaxed as he looked out of the window and could see there were no houses in sight from any direction across the garden.

The dining room, with a large polished table and a cabinet full of china, silver and cut glass looked very unpromising for play. Next they peered into the study. "This is where my Dad keeps his paintings and coin collection" Mark said as they stood in the doorway, and he hinted that there was always spare cash lying around in the drawer if he needed some for sweets.

Upstairs there were four bedrooms. Mark showed Pete the built-in cupboard where his mother had long dresses and expensive looking furs. Hidden underneath was a large locked box. Mark said it contained her jewels. His sister's room was very uninteresting, and very tidy, with stuffed toys neatly arranged as if they were watching her colour TV. Mark bragged that the bathroom on the landing was just for him, but the panel on the side of the bath was removed to expose a jumble of slightly rusty pipes and gaps between the floorboards. A nasty draught was blowing in from underneath.

In Mark's room the floor was in chaos. The whole of one wall was covered with blown up pictures of bugs and insects, with pop stars and footballers on another. In the corner, behind a pile of clothes were a computer table and DVD player. The wall behind was scuffed and dirty from someone's (Mark's?) shoes, and the window was held shut with a flimsy piece of string. "Oh, I had a little accident with the catch when I was swatting a fly," he said cheerily, and Pete wondered if there would be trouble when his mother found out.

The last bedroom was most peculiar. Mark explained that it hadn't been disturbed since Granny had died 4 years ago. A thick layer of dust covered the crowded collection of antique furniture, and Granny's silver hair brush and rings were still lying on the dressing table. No one had been in the room for ages. On the ceiling a damp patch suggested a problem in the roof and across the window there was a huge cobweb. Mark was interested briefly in the large fly caught in the web, but then he remembered that Granny kept a box of games under the bed. He peered underneath and couldn't see anything, although something scurried across his fingers as he reached out.

"Let's get something to eat" said Pete, so they dashed downstairs, but Mark insisted on finishing the tour by going right down into the basement. It was dark and damp smelling and the stairs were musty with mould. What a relief to get back to the kitchen where they made sandwiches and drank milk straight from the bottle. Mark turned off the music and suddenly it seemed eerily quiet and not at all relaxing. They hurriedly finished eating and emerged into the fresh air outside. Time to return to school before they were missed.

Time For Questions

Having read the short story over the page, try the following tasks :

Task 1: Stop and imagine you were thinking of buying this house. Imagine moving round the house in your mind's eye. Think what it looks like from every angle. What colour is the paint work? What can you see from the windows? Is it in good decorative order? Can you imagine the smells?

When you've done that for a moment, write down as many details as you can from the story *without looking back*. Write down everything you can remember, however trivial.

Now when you've done that, *turn your page over*, and go onto the next task.

Task 2: Now try to imagine you are a burglar. Write down everything you can remember from the story again.

Task 3: Imagine this time that someone who is very afraid of spiders is visiting the house. On a new piece of paper write down what you can remember?

Time For Answers

Usually people find that they remember quite a lot of detail the first time they try to recall the story. However, they are often quite biased towards things like the damp in the basement, the work being done in the bathroom, the damp patch on Granny's ceiling and the potential for conversion in the laundry room. The next time, when they remember from the perspective of the burglar, different things are likely to come to mind – things they may have forgotten the first time around. The house being empty every Thursday, the side door left open, the valuables inside. Finally, imagining someone afraid of spiders brings the dust and cobwebs to mind – a whole new arena of memories and feelings may have been stirred.

This exercise may not work all that well for you especially if you've looked ahead or couldn't be bothered to spend much time on writing everything down, or weren't paying close attention. Hopefully it's worked well enough for you see how the mind can distort what it notices or remembers according to how you are feeling at the time. If you are frightened of burglars or spiders, or are thinking about someone who is, you are likely to have distorted your memory in favour of one set of features. Maybe the last bedroom sent shivers down your spine as you recalled a Hitchcock movie?

When you change, or are forced to change, your perspective you can even forget some things you recalled before, remembering instead what fits with the new concerns and demands of the moment. People who have strong fears or even phobias have developed extreme perspectives about something, such as snakes, that can become overwhelming and debilitating. But with support and professional help it is possible to empower them to change their perspective - to the point where they can master their fears and phobias and reclaim their everyday lives.

Curiosity zone – Perspectives: It's good to talk!

Now you've tried the experiment, you might want to continue your exploration of how your emotions can shape your perceptions.

- Go through the text and mark down all the words that you consider 'important'. On a different copy of the text, ask another person to do the same. Compare texts and then try to work out the reasons why you chose the words you did. How well do you know each other?
- Talk to a colleague or partner about a shared experience – a successful business contract, shopping trip, a special concert, or even a night of romance! What did each of you experience? You might find you are "in tune" with each other and have very similar recollections, but you might find that you remember things differently. If so, then try to work out why – it might give you an insight into your differing perspectives.
- Consider this suggestion: 'Over millions of years of further evolution, humans will eventually be able to consciously control all their emotions.' Do you think this would be a good thing?