

Aha! Moments Pop Up from below the Level of Conscious Awareness

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Most of us have had the experience of struggling mightily to solve a problem only to find, while taking a walk or doing the dishes, that the answer comes to us seemingly from nowhere. Psychologists call these sudden aha! moments “insight.” They occur not only when we are faced with a problem but also when we suddenly “get” a joke or crossword puzzle clue or are jolted by a personal realization. Scientists have identified distinctive brain activity patterns that signal moments of insight, but there is still some debate about whether insight is simply the final, most satisfying step in a deliberative thought process or a wholly separate form of thinking.

An ingenious new study by a team of Belgian psychologists provides additional evidence that insight engages unconscious mechanisms that differ from analytic, step-by-step reasoning. Even when people are managing multiple demands on their brainpower, the research suggests their intuitive thought processes may still be readily accessible.

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