



Seth Slater M.F.A.
The Dolphin Divide

Monsters of the Mind

Is there a perceptual basis for the darkness that lurks within?

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You are not alone, but that doesn't mean you are safe. Nor does it mean they aren't real. Monsters have been striking fear into human hearts since the dawn of time, and they can appear at a moment's notice, thanks to the limbic system's penchant for creating emotions and storing memories.

The blink of an eye takes roughly 84 milliseconds. Within half that time, according to studies of perceptual illusions and false memories, you can tap the darkness within and conjure monsters for yourself.

From its hidey-hole deep within the forebrain, your limbic system will do much of the heavy lifting for you, transforming shadowy objects on eerie nights into ghoulish tormentors.

But just what are we experiencing when we trip over demons in the dark?

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Something real, certainly.

We can measure at least some of the effects created when we experience a sense of horror or dread, spookiness or terror. Regulatory chemicals flood our bodies causing blood pressure to increase as vessels contract. Our hearts beat faster. We begin to sweat and, sometimes, even to shake as adrenaline prepares us to fight or take flight.

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But what caused all the hubbub to begin with?

Our perceptual hardware, it turns out, can be strongly influenced by associational priming.

Put a warm mug of coffee in a person's hands and introduce her to someone holding a tall glass of iced coffee. Get them talking for a while, then ask each of them how the interaction went. The warm mug holder will likely report a meeting characterized by social warmth, while the iced coffee drinker will more likely perceive the conversation to have been socially chilly.

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Pictures and words – whether printed or orally transmitted – can serve as priming stimuli too. As members of a social species constantly transmitting ideas in the form of words and pictures, each of us is perpetually primed by cultural metaphor to know just what to do with primitive fears when they are triggered – we make monsters.

Afraid a distracted friend hasn't quite heard you? You may think, "Geez, he's acting like a zombie. Looking right through me, not hearing a thing." Know a negative someone who seems to forever be sapping your emotional reserves? C'mon, tell the truth – you've probably likened them to a vampire on an occasion or two. Maybe out loud, maybe just to yourself.

Point is, midnight visits to graveyards aren't required for conjuring monsters. They are always with us, permanently stored in our brains as a form of false memory deposited for future use by the priming stimuli of our culture.

And, like other forms of false memory, they can be triggered by seemingly minor, routine concerns. When thoughts like "He's not hearing me" or "She's draining my emotions again" arise, our fears about what these emotional boogey-men can do tend to snowball rapidly. The results can make us feel like we've been ravaged by an actual monster.

There is a perceptual underpinning to why, once triggered and thereby invited to come out and play, the monsters of our mind so often end up ruling the day – or at least dominating our thoughts and feelings for a time.

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The phenomenon is called boundary extension, and it is strongly associated with false memory.

Show a person a picture in which only a portion of a house is visible, and the mind will construct a mental picture of what the rest of the house might look like. In other words, we extend the boundaries of what we see until it matches our culturally learned expectation of whatever a thing is supposed to look like.

We know from movies, books, and ghost stories told around childhood campfires that monsters tend to run roughshod over whatever landscape they inhabit. So when a zombie or vampire seems to rear its ugly head during a daily conversation, we may well psychically extend the boundary around our own perceptual monster until enough of it is free to do real emotional damage.

As a former dolphin trainer, I've always suspected that we humans may not be alone in making monsters out of mole hills – especially in cases where cultural priming may be involved.

Unlike many other animals – but very much like humans – dolphins possess an unusually high degree of self-awareness, are capable of abstract thought, and, it turns out, even exhibit tell-tale signs of culture.

In the wild, dolphins actually name themselves and frequently begin underwater communication with an identifying stream of bubbles accompanied by what has become known as a signature whistle.

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Together, the bubble stream and signature whistle provide both visual as well as audio cues to nearby dolphins about who is communicating. Interestingly, signature whistles of individual dolphins carry sound fragments closely related to those found in the signature whistles of the individual's mother. Dolphins, it seems, not only name themselves; they choose names that honor their matrilineal heritage. Signs of culture, indeed.

Might dolphins, too, conjure monsters from psychic depths? If dolphin behavior offers any clues, they might.

In spite of their perpetual smiles and storied penchant for playfulness, dolphins, like people, possess a darker side. They are fully capable of bullying behavior and engaging in argument just like their human counterparts. When peeved, they toss their heads in obvious displays of annoyance. When bumped or jostled, they snap their mouths open and shut at each other, issuing loud warnings known as jaw-popping. At times, they even engage in bare-toothed brawls that leave visible rake-like scars on the skin.

Could creatures who call one another by culturally prescribed names also transmit stories containing monstrous imagery as a kind of linguistic short-hand for the very real damage sometimes wrought by inner demons? That, of course, is anyone's guess. As is the question of whether cultural priming – in addition to giving perceptual form to our worst fears – might also offer effective defense against whatever darkness bubbles up from the depths. In the meantime, our leviathans lurk in the deep.



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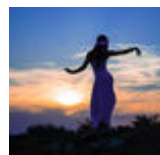
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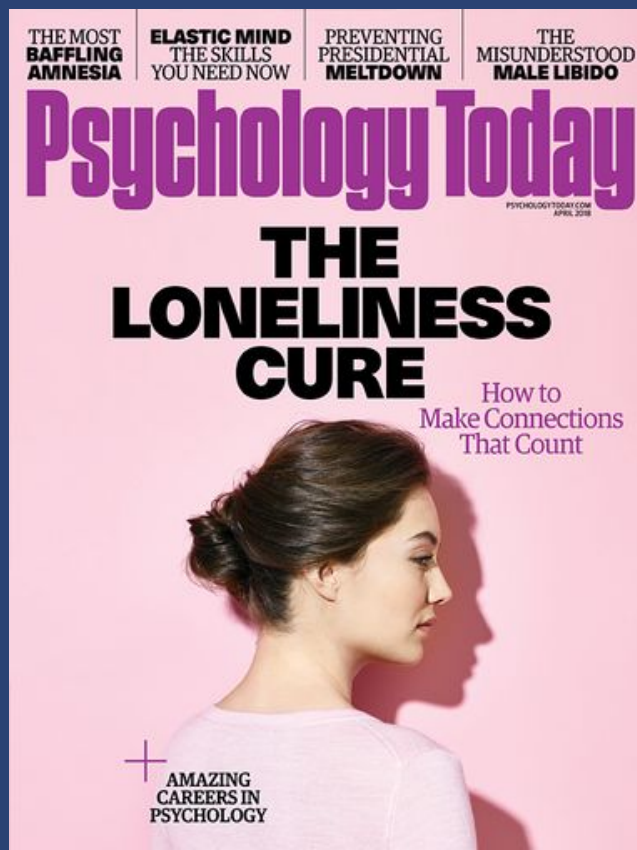
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