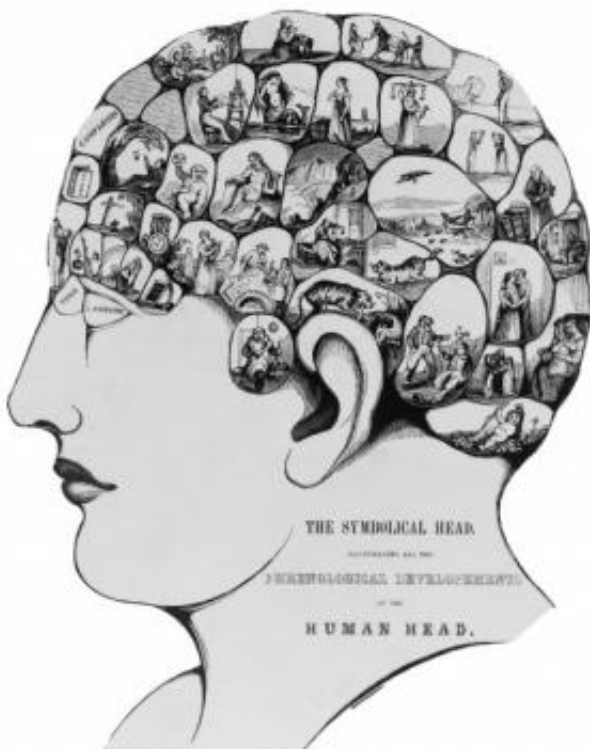


# Spontaneous thoughts are perceived to reveal meaningful self-insight

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Credit: Karen Arnold/Public Domain

Spontaneous thoughts, intuitions, dreams and quick impressions. We all have these seemingly random thoughts popping into our minds on a daily basis. The question is what do we make of these unplanned, spur-of-the-moment thoughts? Do we view them as coincidental wanderings of a restless mind, or as revealing meaningful insight into ourselves?

A research team from Carnegie Mellon University and Harvard Business School set out to determine how people perceive their own spontaneous thoughts and if those thoughts or intuitions have any influence over judgment. Published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, their research found that spontaneous thoughts are

perceived to provide potent self-insight and can influence judgment and decisions more than similar, more deliberate kinds of thinking – even on important topics such as commitment to current romantic partners.

"We are aware of the output of spontaneous thoughts, but lack insight into the reasons why and processes by which they occurred. Rather than dismiss these seemingly random thoughts as meaningless, our research found that people believe, precisely because they are not controlled, that spontaneous thoughts reveal more meaningful insight into their own mind—their beliefs, attitudes, and preferences—than similar deliberate thoughts. As a consequence, spontaneous thoughts can have a more potent influence on judgment," said Carey K. Morewedge, lead author and associate professor of marketing in the Tepper School of Business with an additional appointment in the Dietrich College's Department of Social and Decision Sciences. "People often believe their intuitions, dreams and or random thoughts reveal more insight than the result of more effortful thinking and reasoning. This research helps to explain these curious beliefs. "

For the study, Morewedge, CMU's Colleen E. Giblin and Harvard University's Michael I. Norton ran five studies. The first three were designed to test the hypothesis that the more spontaneous a thought is, the more it is believed to provide meaningful self-insight. Participants rated the extent to which different thought categories are spontaneous or controlled and the extent to which each provides self-insight; they recalled either a pleasant or unpleasant childhood event and evaluated the degree that the recollection would provide meaningful self-insight if it happened spontaneously or deliberately; and they generated thoughts about four strangers through a deliberative or spontaneous process and rated how much those thoughts provided them with valuable self-insight.

The results suggest that when people evaluate a particular thought, they not only consider its content, they are also influenced by their more general beliefs about different thought processes. Thoughts with the same content are judged to be more meaningful if they occurred through a spontaneous, uncontrolled process rather than a deliberate, controlled process. The effect was found across various kinds of thought and thought content, including thoughts about other people. This means that the content of spontaneous thought need not be entirely about the self in order for people to feel like they've gleaned meaningful self-insight.

The last two experiments extended the investigation to determine if the greater insight attributed to spontaneous thoughts leads them to have a greater impact on judgment. The researchers tested this first by having participants think about a love interest other than their present or most recent significant other spontaneously or deliberately, report the self-insight that the thought provided and then indicate their attraction toward that person. They found that those who spontaneously generated a thought of a love interest believed that thought revealed more self-insight and perceived their attraction to be stronger than the participants who identified a love interest with deliberate thinking.

Finally, to determine whether this greater influence would extend to both positive and negative spontaneous thoughts, participants recalled a positive or negative experience related to their current or most recent romantic relationship. Participants reported the extent to which the spontaneous and deliberate recollection of that memory would provide them with meaningful self-insight and increase or decrease the likelihood that they would end the relationship. The results showed that participants believed the recollection of a positive or negative experience with their current romantic partner would reveal more self-insight and have a greater influence on their commitment to that relationship if it was recalled spontaneously rather than deliberately.

"The perception that a thought popped into mind out of nowhere can lead people to overvalue their

own insights. When considering a thought that came to mind spontaneously, it may be useful to ask yourself the following question: had the same thought come to mind after careful deliberation, would it seem just as meaningful? If you realize that your interpretation of a particular thought depends on whether it came to mind spontaneously, that's an indication that your beliefs about these different kinds of [thoughts](#) might be affecting your judgment," said Giblin, a doctoral student in CMU's Tepper School of Business.

**More information:** A copy of the paper is available for download at [careymorewedge.com/papers/SpontaneousThought.pdf](http://careymorewedge.com/papers/SpontaneousThought.pdf)

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

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