

# ***THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MAGIC***

## Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Theater Arts E.4.6 – Rehearse and perform a scene or play for peers and invited guests

Health F.4.1 – Distinguish between and demonstrate verbal and nonverbal communication

In order to be successful, magicians also rely on psychology. Psychology is the science that deals with the way our brains work and how we behave as a result. Magicians rely on their knowledge of psychology and specifically memory, perception (how we recognize and interpret things we see, hear, taste, touch, or smell according to information stored in our brains,) and deception (the act of misleading someone into believing something that is false) in order to practice their art. Using psychology, they create an “effect” (what the audience sees or perceives). The way that they do this is called the method. Author Simon Singh describes the method as “the magician’s secret way of achieving the effect.” Often, psychology is used to disguise the method and separate it from the effect. The audience will then see the effect, but not the method.

Physical misdirection is one way magicians use psychology to disguise their method. Through physical misdirection, the magician can direct the audience’s attention to something, and while they are focused on that, the magician can perform the trickery elsewhere, totally unnoticed. Misdirection works because of psychological principles, like the tendency of the human mind to be easily distracted by movement or the introduction of something new, and the tendency to look where others are looking. A simple example follows: A magician shows an empty hat, then turns to introduce his assistant. As he looks toward her, so does the audience. The assistant trips coming onto the stage and while the audience’s attention is on her, the magician sneaks a rabbit into the empty hat.

In mental misdirection, a magician misdirects the audience’s suspicion rather than their attention. The magician, in other words, uses a “false method,” doing the trick in such a way that the audience thinks they know how it works, but in the end are still left baffled. As the audience focuses on the false method, they miss the real one, and their attempts to figure out how the trick is done fail.

Here is a trick that uses physical misdirection to fool the audience. Practice it and try it on your friends and family. It is called the “Balancing Grape” and it is taken from the *Usborne Book of Magic Tricks*.

- 1) Start with your first finger pointing upwards, secretly holding a cocktail stick or toothpick behind it with your thumb. Keep the point just below the tip of your finger.
- 2) Tell the audience that you will balance a grape on your finger. Push the grape onto the cocktail stick, pretending to position it on the end of your finger.

- 3) Move your hand as if it is difficult to keep the grape balanced, and pretend to concentrate hard. Keep your palm towards you to hide the cocktail stick.
- 4) To finish, take the grape off the cocktail stick and give it to someone in the audience to try the trick. While no-one is watching, put the stick in your pocket.

The next trick uses mental misdirection to fool the audience. Practice it and try it on your friends and family. It is called "Gambler's Bluff" and again comes from the *Usborne Book of Magic Tricks*.

- 1) A good gambler's voice will not give away his cards. Here you pretend to recognize a chosen card from the tone of a volunteer's voice. To prepare, put the four aces aside and secretly put six hearts on top of the pack and six on the bottom.
- 2) Ask a volunteer to deal the 48 cards into six piles, take a card from the middle of a pile and memorize it.
- 3) Then ask her to put her card on top of any pile, and put the other piles on top and underneath.
- 4) Let her cut the pack a few times, then ask her to deal the cards face-up, naming them as she deals them.
- 5) Stop her when you hear a card between two hearts. It is her card. Pretend you knew from her voice.
- 6) If you miss it, ask her to deal again. It could be the first card in the pack if the second is a single heart.

Practice these tricks and perform them for your friends and family. Observe their reactions to see if your attempts at misdirection are working.