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What Can Magicians Teach Us About the Brain?
Neuroscience can learn a lot by tapping the intuitive knowledge of magicians as new source for inspiration and study.

By Richard Haas and Louis Sloan

A magician’s show is a bit like a cross between an art show, a theatre piece, and a circus. The best ones are mind-blowing. What happened?

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Don't worry, the laws of physics haven't broken. Magicians do not have superhuman powers, rather, they are masters at deception; masters at the manipulation of human perception, attention, and awareness. Insight, awareness, a sense of outer space, audacity, are all the factors magicians rely on in their performance. But how can the secrets of magic teach us about the brain?

The underlying concept of using tricks to make people question what they think they know about something. Magicians use such sensory illusions in their tricks, but they also use similar cognitive illusions, manipulating our awareness, our attention, our perception, our language, and even our memory. Sometimes, even without trickery, psychologists have found similar phenomena with the scientific method. They can be controlled, but they have been observed for so long, making the difference between perception and reality.

Magicians can teach us about the brain in a few ways:

1. Perception and Attention:
   - Magicians can manipulate our perception of reality. When a magician says a card has been placed on the table, our attention is often drawn to that card, even when it’s not the correct one. This teaches us about how our attention is drawn to certain stimuli.

2. Memory and Recall:
   - Magicians often rely on our memory and the way our minds store information. When a magician asks us to remember a card, our brain is eagerly searching for the information to perform the trick.

3. Cognitive Illusions:
   - Magicians often use cognitive illusions to their advantage. For example, a magician might make us believe that a card has been switched, but in reality, the card never left the deck. This teaches us about how our minds can be misled by our own biases.

4. Neuroplasticity:
   - Magicians often perform tricks that require our brain to create new connections. When a magician asks us to imagine a card, our brain is creating a new neural pathway to create the illusion.

By studying how magicians manipulate our minds, we can gain a deeper understanding of how our brains work. This can be applied to many areas of life, from advertising to business and even psychology. Magicians can teach us some of the most amazing tricks and insights into the human brain.