

# Psychics' Fears of Psychic Powers

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**ABSTRACT:** Preliminary research suggests that ordinary people, as well as parapsychologists, may have pre- or unconscious fears of psi that affect their thinking about and reactions to it. What about people who are very heavily involved with psi in their daily lives, that is, psychics? This paper surveys the fears and ambivalences about psi of people who have worked on becoming psychic in the context of an interest in personal growth. Fears expressed focus on the unknown quality to which psi opens one, loss of control, giving power to others to validate or invalidate one, confusion resulting from malicious invalidation, distortions of self and psychic functioning resulting from the need to please, forced self-changes, succumbing to others' emotions, lack of criteria for validation of unusual experiences, maladaptive loss of ordinary fears, fear of success, isolation resulting from an inability to communicate, invalidation of conventional work ethic values, frightening others, becoming ill from taking on others' problems, and problems in handling new sorts of power.

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On the surface, scientific discussion of the existence and nature of psi presumes that the parties to the discussion are rational people, operating at a purely intellectual level in their examination of relevant facts and theories. Both I and others have argued that, to the contrary, almost everyone has strong emotional attitudes towards psi (Batchelder, 1966, 1984; Eisenbud, 1963, 1970, 1972, 1979, 1982, 1983; Harary, 1985; Isaacs, 1984; LeShan, 1966; Pearce, 1974; Rogo, 1977; Servadio, 1958; Tart, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c). Because these attitudes are partially to fully unconscious or otherwise not explicitly recognized, they seriously distort ostensibly rational discussions about psi.

As I have argued elsewhere (Tart, 1984a), the first step toward correcting this situation is conscious recognition and acceptance of both one's own and others' emotional attitudes toward psi. One process that can further both of these steps is the deliberate study of others' attitudes. Toward this end, I have reported observations gathered from participants in workshops I have given on psi (Tart, 1983a) and from a mixed student and community population more typical of the populations commonly used in parapsychological research (Tart & Labore, 1986).

This paper reports on ambivalent and negative attitudes toward psi in a special group: people whose positive attitudes toward and interest in psi are sufficiently strong for them to undertake long training to become psychics. Often this interest is strong enough

that they come to earn at least part of their living as professional psychics.

#### A SAMPLE OF PSYCHICS

The term “psychic” in this paper will generally mean a person who believes he or she can pick up information by one or more kinds of ESP and/or affect things by some sort of PK, with either of these abilities developed to a sufficiently reliable level to be of practical use. The participants in this study were students and former students of Helen Palmer, a well-known Berkeley psychic and personal friend of mine.

Helen Palmer earns her living by doing psychic readings for clients, and she is so successful at this that her waiting list for appointments usually runs for a year or more. She has a Master’s degree in psychology but did not discover her psychic abilities until after her formal education was completed. Her readings emphasize the personal growth implications of her impressions as being much more important than dwelling on the psychic (in the sense of finding out things about the client not normally known to the reader) aspects of her impressions. She has taught a variety of psychic and personal development courses for several years and has a number of long-term students. Her students also have strong commitments to their own and others’ personal and spiritual growth, although there is wide variation and eclecticism in their particular psychic, personal, and spiritual growth practices. As one of her students expressed it during the data-collection discussion,

In Helen’s emphasis, you don’t work on yourself in order to become a better psychic reader, you work on being a psychic reader in order to work on yourself. Learning to read clearly is a way of learning to work with your own energy and self.

This particular group of respondents may or may not be typical of other people who would consider themselves psychic. Future research will eventually have to consider sample characteristics before generalizing results.

#### DATA COLLECTION

After several conversations about semi- and unconscious fears of psi, Ms. Palmer and I agreed it would be valuable to have a group session with her students about this topic. We expected that this would not only provide useful scientific data but also have some therapeutic and growth implications for her students. We had both observed that people who begin to recognize some of their fears of

psi often suffer unnecessarily because they think they are the only person with such feelings and therefore "abnormal." Some participants did subsequently report that it had been freeing and insightful to share their fears and ambivalent feelings with sympathetic others.

Lest the focus on negative aspects of psi give a misleading impression of Ms. Palmer and her students, it is important to note that, overall, psi is a very positive topic for them. It is connected with vital ideas and practices about spiritual growth and a complete life. The present study focuses on what the students would consider one small part of their reality.

Fourteen people participated in a 2-hour session. All discussion was tape-recorded and later transcribed. Ms. Palmer introduced me to her students. I explained that (a) I had found that many people had various kinds of fears of psi that could be tapped with a little psychological probing, (b) I thought they would be an especially interesting group to discuss this topic with because of their extensive work with and commitment to psychic and spiritual matters, (c) sharing their feelings about this would be valuable in furthering our psychological understanding of and ability to deal with fears of psi, and (d) Ms. Palmer and I thought it would probably be helpful to their personal growth to share these feelings. I promised that what they said was confidential in that their names or facts that might specifically identify them would never be released.

We then had an informal discussion with various people volunteering descriptions of feelings they had about psi and others offering comments on their reactions to these feelings. I acted as a moderator, occasionally asking people to elaborate on their statements or feelings and moving the discussion forward when a given topic started to go flat.

#### CONCERNS RELATED TO PSYCHIC AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In this paper I will report all concerns which were sufficiently expressed to be understandable. Most, but not all, of these concerns were shared by more than one person, as judged by head noddings, facial expressions, or verbal comments. Many concerns deal with perceived consequences of being psychic rather than psychic functioning itself. As one person put it, "Being psychic per se no longer freaks me out; it's auxiliary issues that being psychic brings up."

The responses were often eloquent, so aside from grouping them, I will generally let them speak for themselves without further comment. When my own remarks are quoted, italics will be used to

differentiate them from the comments of the psychics. Each new paragraph indicates that a different person is speaking.

### *Opening Up to the Unknown*

When psi is turned on I don't know what's going to come up, and that's out of control. I don't like that.

We're talking [about how psi affects your life] from the view of a rational person on the path, not from that of someone who has transcended. We're in a great limbo, a kind of purgatory. Where you haven't got the great transcendental feedback to drive you on, you need to go on faith. Once you get there, all that crazy stuff [like fears of the unknown] grinds to a halt. What a relief!

I am working on it [psi and spiritual development] now with positive thinking, in the hope that this will bias the function so only positive stuff will come up. This should eliminate the fear as to whether I can handle the information that will come up.

Who knows what you might be opening up to? It's a loss of ego. My husband is also psychic, and we took a dive into real madness. We didn't know it until we landed in the hospital. I can see the line [between sanity and insanity] now, but I still have a fear of that happening again.

You have to develop faith. I wake up in the night energized. What I would do before would [be] sit, let it clog in my head, my fears would rev up, my hearing get acute, I would imagine someone was trying to get in the house. Now I get up and try to move the energy, and I have nice experiences with it. It's developing a faith for me that there is something. It feels safe to go with the energy. But it's scary taking the first step.

You've got to build the base really strongly with work on personality. Then the peak of the pyramid, the peak experience, is not so scary. Support the ego, keep it real, and sooner or later you will transcend, but you don't force transcendence. The samadhi experiences, the heavy experiences, are rare, they blow you out. Psychic reading is a cinch by comparison. I'm very cautious [about] high energy states. Those who were opened up with a big bang don't try to go back to it very much, but those who are working their way up gradually keep trying to go [higher].

### *Loss of Control, Possession*

Who knows what you might be opening up to? It's a loss of ego. My first psi experiences were in Brazil, where psi stuff, mediumistic stuff, is taken for granted. How can you let go of ego and let something else come in to you and speak through you? The practice of oriental-style meditation reduced that fear.

Once I get out there, will I be able to return?

*Loss of Control of Life Direction*

I can't differentiate now between "This is rational life" and "This is psychic life." I started "running energies" a few years ago, charged all of my chakras and "went out." It's hard to describe: it was very profound. I don't fear death anymore, I know good exists. The next day my girlfriend didn't recognize me I was changed so much. I could have gone there again the next night, but I had to put some brakes on it; I felt the fear of having to lose control of my life. It would be carried somewhere else in a radical way, and I wasn't ready to go there yet. My choice was that I wasn't ready yet. It will come back when I'm ready, but it was fear that kept me back then.

*Giving Power to Others to Validate or Invalidate One*

Like doing a reading was once a big deal. That was 12 years ago. Ego fears: Is this correct? Am I doing a good job? After [a] time [of] just getting the courage to do it, then the fear went into another area. The fear is in the paralysis, not in the state, not in the action.

It was frightening to begin doing readings. I usually kept my psychic stuff to myself, but now I'd have to say something and wait to see if the other person would validate it. It's like exposing myself. Especially if you're going on and on without getting any feedback. Like taking a dive off a cliff. They might think I was crazy. I could be really humiliated by saying all these wild things. I had to deal with it by just keep[ing] doing it and doing it.

I have a lot of self-doubt. I always wonder after a reading if I've made it up. I've learned to just give the info and ask the client to give me feedback later on, like days later. I use this to strengthen my confidence in hanging in there.

*In doing a reading you're giving someone a large amount of power to validate or invalidate you: That's scary!*

Yes!

*Confusion, Invalidation From Others' Refusal to Validate*

When being psychic gets mixed up with other crap going on in life, it's freaky. I grew up getting all the emotional stuff in the family, and when I'd try to find out [if they really felt that way], they'd deny it, invalidate my perceptions. They'd deny it. It drove me crazy. I would embellish it, too, but could never get the feedback to figure out what was my embellishment and what was correct perception. When you get psychic stuff and people refuse to validate it, that's horrible! [Laughter and head nodding indicated general agreement.] Not only do people deliberately withhold validation, often their own fixations are such that they don't know what is the truth.

Note that the term "fixations" used above and in some subsequent quotes is used in a technical sense to denote particular personality/ego types on the enneagram of ego fixations (see Lilly

& Hart, 1983), a system used by many of these psychics as part of their personal growth work.<sup>1</sup>

### *Distortions From the Need to Please*

A person who was of a fixation type with a strong need to please other people (Ego Plan in the Enneagram system of personality types) commented:

I'd want everything to be OK for the person I was reading for, and when it wasn't that raised a bunch of personality issues for me. I'm in Aikido and Reichian therapy to help get grounded [although they raise issues too], and all I can do is keep sticking with it. I have to fight the desire to make everything OK, it is a block to the psychic stuff, it makes me give bad information. I can help people more if I tell them what I really see.

### *Forced Self-Change*

Fear that if you do get through to [the] other side you will be unalterably changed. I'm afraid of that. I got into this to read other people, but the effects on the readers' personality are more profound than on the people you read for. It's constantly bringing up your own noise and ego in ways you have to sit with. You're going to get nailed for that in this work, your ego stays 6 inches in front of your nose!

*What's special about psychic reading that brings up your personality, compared to, say, interpreting a psychological test, where you can be relatively impersonal?*

Each of us is an instrument, but that instrument is really flawed by your own [personality] fixation. To really give a good reading you have to know what is your fixation, what is the client's fixation. You have to change yourself to improve.

I used to be afraid of new openings because of the issues they would raise, but now I'm not afraid of them. I read from my belly [referring to the idea or experience of an important psychic center in

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<sup>1</sup> Briefly, this system conceptualizes nine basic personality types, each resulting from a defensive strategy adopted in early childhood to preserve an individual's essential self from the trauma and pressure of the enculturation process. The nine defense mechanisms are reaction formation, repression, identification, introjection, isolation, projection, sublimation/rationalization, denial, and narcotization. The enneagram is a complex diagram first introduced in the West by G. I. Gurdjieff (Ouspensky, 1949) and is considered to represent basic laws that govern the interaction of defensive patterns and, thus, ego types. The system is supposed to be very ancient, but its modern version has been clarified and updated by Claudio Naranjo, a psychiatrist (Naranjo, personal communication, 1972). It is taught as an oral tradition and primarily intended to be used for corrective work on oneself as a foundation for spiritual growth.

the belly, the Japanese *hara*], which is different from most people. It makes me feel close and intimate with people, and that's splendid. It's scarier to deal with the real world.

A new scary thing is using the process of psychic reading to work on yourself instead of on other people. Ask it about your own personal issues. Now it's feeling like a viable solution.

Helen finds that you think you are afraid of the psychic stuff or of the other state, but it's actually your personality afraid it can't integrate it, not the phenomena or state per se.

### *Picking Up and Succumbing to Others' Emotions*

Sensing other's fears can make me sick for days sometimes. I have to use special techniques to get rid of them.

It's important to learn to distinguish between yourself and others in order to not get confused over what are your feelings, or get carried away by others' feelings. When I was more attached to people this led to great confusion, but as I've learned to get detached, it's easier to distinguish.

For me the confusion with others comes when I'm all up in my head, but as I learn to get more into my body, it's easier to keep the distinction.

We did a group training reading on one person once. At the end of the reading I was so angry, and I didn't know why. Then I realized it was the readee's anger I had picked up, and I realized that's what I did: I picked up the client's energy and ran it through me. Then I had to learn how to get rid of unwanted pickup. How do I protect myself?

I was wondering once why my clientele wasn't increasing. I knew I was good. Ann Armstrong [a well-known California psychic] gave me feedback: I walked in and I was real clean and real pure and that would freak people out! They would project themselves on to me, and they were afraid of themselves. What I do now is disconnect from that space, fake being ordinary. I have to be ordinary in an ordinary way, not what had become my way of being "ordinary," but by the usual social standards. Clients started coming in! I had to adapt my energy to the client.

*Are you saying the energy you let out from being in a different space of being, a psychic space, freaked people out, quite aside from whether you actually said a word to them?* [Nodded agreement.]

### *How Do You Validate Experience? What is Reality?*

When I discovered that what I thought to be true about the psychic was really true, it grounded me a lot, made it much less fearful.

A more fearful issue is when you start to get into other realities, to make more profound changes in yourself, then what validates your reality? You can't even trust the support of the people you're with,

that you love, because what differentiates that from a cult? You're far from the realities of your culture! What feedback can you believe? Do I keep on, or am I crazy? Is this it, or am I crazy? This is the big issues. That's the reason for working on yourself.

### *Losing Adaptive Ordinary World Fears*

You may get so "high" from psychic spaces that when you go out into the ordinary world you aren't discriminating, you're too accepting, and that can get you into trouble. All those wonderful cans of tomatoes in the store! You can get hooked on that state! You're feeling so good, and here's this 2,000 pounds of car coming down the street!

*A fear that you're not going to be afraid when you should be!*

You should, but you're not, that's the problem.

*A funny fear, you don't feel fear, but your mind knows you should be objectively afraid. You know you're being inappropriate.*

I like to spend some time with conservative friends who don't believe in any of this every couple of weeks, it's checking in on what the rules are!

### *Isolation From Ordinary People*

I was feeling really isolated for a while, my friends would say "You know that already" or the like, it was disconcerting for people to feel you were scanning them all the time.

That kind of dissolution might not feel so bad if you're in a group that supports that and you, but if you're out there alone, it's kind of spooky. This calls for a tremendous act of faith, with no feedback.

Everyday life can be made difficult. When I go to college functions with my husband I go by his name, not my psychic practice name, to avoid the complications and rejections I would otherwise run in to. I don't open myself.

### *Fear of Success*

Using it to guide myself it will lead me to success, and that brings up my fears of success.

Fear of success in the psychic is like fear of success in psychotherapy. The closer you get to success in either case, the more the personality fights back, putting these obstructions up.

### *Unknown Changes in the Self*

You fear that if you do get through to other side you will be unalterably changed, and you're afraid of that.

*Inability to Communicate*

A fear that you won't be able to express your experience.

A fear that you will be able to express it, but it won't make sense to anybody.

*Invalidating Conventional Work Ethic Values*

We've always been taught to get to something the hard way. Not to use intuition. No support for intuition, and using it invalidates all the investment in conventional ways of doing things.

*How would you like to have it 100%?*

It's too easy then! Why have I worked so hard in the world if it's that easy!

At it's extreme you end up as an empty site for the manifestations of the Great Power. The ego dissolves. When you start to approach that, it's wonderful from one perspective, but it's also I'm not here, it is coming through, so what's the point of me? Just one more atom, now I'm gone, so what? All my friends are still out there doing things.

*Frightening Others*

Any time you bring anything up from the "other world," so to speak, it scares them. I have to be real careful. I feel other people's body reactions real quick.

*What are they scared of?*

Their own stuff!

When I've exposed myself to the wrong people it scares them. Being a seven [Ego Plan fixation type], the narcissus-type thing happens and then I get scared to death.

Often I don't say much, I just sit there serenely, but it gets to people.

When you're centered you're very detached, it takes a lot of energy to animate yourself.

I do body work also and am a healer also. I can touch someone and remove a block. People do feel it when I touch them. I don't do it until I feel they are ready to handle the issues around this, issues of power, etc. I work with the issues that come up, they do get afraid of it. I've been called a lot of names, like witch. I remember a time when a healing was done on me and I thought about what was happening; it was scary.

I used to do this defensively to get rid of people. I would register their negativity and then manifest it, and it would get rid of them. Sounds weird, but it was a marvelous defense mechanism. Presented me in the negative, but got rid of them. It was involuntary for a period of my teens.

*Getting Sick From Taking On Others' Problems*

Sensing others' fears can make me sick for days sometimes. I have to use special techniques to get rid of them.

I had an extreme problem with this confusion, the more I learned to blend and merge with people and making sure they liked me, the worse it got. I would do a reading and get sick. I was sick for a year in one period. If they had an ear ache, two days later I had an earache.

*Fears of PK-Like Psi*

The issue of PK-like psi abilities, with which one could change the world and people, rather than just psychically sense them, was not raised until late in the evening. Although it was not pursued at any length, the comments are of considerable interest.

*Let's raise the trick question of magic. If others begin to feel you don't just read them, you affect them, how do you feel? Or if you begin to feel this yourself, how do you feel?*

I deal with this by just thinking positive source, these things come from God. If I could feel energy and it felt good for someone I just felt it was from God. [Several people say "Yes!"]

Helen remembers a woman who stood on the roof and yelled at her, and when she fought against it, the woman was worse. She had to learn to think positive thoughts at her, and then things would settle down. That works for me.

I've had the same experience with a neighbor who's a juvenile delinquent.

Everybody here is working with the light side of the energy. In Brazil I've seen the dark side, I've seen people die from this, but you have to be receptive to it, believe that it will harm you. The energy is there, how you use it depends on you.

If I could always get what I wanted from magical affirmations or the like, well it would be too easy then! Why have I worked so hard in the world if it's that easy! It makes me realize that in my life I have to put in a lot more positive feeling about people. That makes me feel better about affirmations, because if they come true it's all right for people.

*Temptations and Problems of Power*

The issue of evil. This group isn't surrounded by people who are into serious evil, murders, etc. The only experience I've had that's even remotely close to this is someone I knew who had studied psychic stuff a lot. Friends of mine in this group had given her a reading and she used her abilities to block them. She had the ego satisfaction of enjoying the fact that she had the power to block them. It bothers me that you can have that kind of power but still that kind of allegiance to ego. That kind of ego hasn't grown with the

energy. This is a sheltered group, but I have no reason not to believe that you can have combinations of power and immature egos.

I've seen teachers where there's been a problem with their use of power. I stopped after I initially started reading because it raised issues of power: Could I take responsibility for the way I was affecting people? I needed to deal with those before I went on. I have a real problem with things that make me feel special or separate me from people. I keep wanting to say this is not my ego, I'm a channel. Other people have this ability even if they're not manifesting it.

I've tried a couple of times fighting fire with fire, and I immediately realized the ramifications to my own personality. If I did that I would become totally paranoid that it was being done to me! It was an immediate feedback. That's not acceptable. So I send out lots of positive vibes to people who are bugging me, I ask that they be healed. That seems to work.

I had a difficult interaction with my father-in-law, who felt that what I was doing was probably fraudulent, or at least aberrated. I felt an intense suppressed rage from him. It felt like a hex of a kind, you get these big blocks of negative energy coming at you. That energetic current that goes into repressed energy can be directed, but it's much better to release it than fight it on its own ground.

If somebody hates me I can feel validated, more important.

I worked in another psychic group before I met Helen, and they were always working to protect themselves, someone was always after you. Someone taught me a technique for fighting fire with fire. It worked. It gave me a sense of my own power, but I immediately left that group. It took so much energy! When you get receptive to it you pick it up so much more. It's clearly there, but you don't have to tune into it. If you keep your vibes high, you won't tune into it. Are you here to be of service, or what?

There are groups around that attract students who are vulnerable, then they have to protect themselves, this attracts more attacks, you have to bolster yourself more, you need the support of the groups, etc., etc. to keep the guard up.

#### PERSPECTIVE ON THE FEAR OF PSI

A natural result of reading all these negative feelings and fears is to start thinking of this group as very fearful of psi. This would not be correct. Remember these are people who are actively seeking psychic development as part of their personal and spiritual growth. We had a specialized focus on the negative, so naturally it predominated. To partially restore balance, note the following two remarks:

I'm a Four [fixation-type Melancholic, with a strong tendency to overdramatize], and I find the psychic stuff a way of getting a solid reality, giving me a perspective on the nuttiness of everyday life.

I am terrified of everyday reality, there are terrible things out there, it's much safer in my own mind! Psi stuff does raise things in your personality that may take 20 years to adjust to, but the world news is what's really terrifying!

#### CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present study add to those of earlier ones in giving us the beginnings of a catalog of the fears people have about psi and psychic functioning.

In an earlier study (Tart & Labore, 1986), a mixed group of college students and townspeople were interviewed about feelings related to psi-like abilities, as elicited by their participation in a "belief experiment." About half of them were asked to temporarily believe and then react to the idea that they could undergo a safe procedure that would permanently make them fully aware of all the thoughts and feelings of everyone within a 100-yard radius.

Reactions were predominantly negative and covered such feelings as concern for being able to control the ability, fear of incapacitating overload, concern for the responsibility that knowledge obtained in this way would bring, concern as to whether they were mature enough to handle such an ability, ethical concerns about violating others' privacy, and fears about what other people would think of them when their ability became known.

The other half were asked to believe and react to the idea of a PK-like ability, being able to move anything within a 100-yard radius that they could normally move with their body by thought alone. There was more concern with what others might do with such an ability than with what the respondent might do, as well as concern with whether they could adequately control this ability and whether the procedure for inducing it was really safe.

These seem to be primarily concerns about the psi ability itself, whereas the present group accepted the psi abilities per se and were more concerned with longer-term consequences, especially as they related to personal and spiritual growth. Together they map out a broad spectrum of concern about psi abilities that has not been adequately explored.

I have let these data speak for themselves, but I shall conclude by quoting from part of the conclusion of my recent article, "Acknowledging and Dealing with the Fear of Psi":

One of the great discoveries of modern psychology is that unconscious processes exist and that they cannot be effectively handled by pretending that they are not there. I believe that unconscious fear of psi is very strong among parapsychologists, as well as people in general. This unacknowledged fear is a primary reason for the gener-

ally trivial manifestation of psi in our laboratories, and it will continue to stifle progress in our field until it is acknowledged and dealt with. There may be real reasons for fearing some aspects of psi, such as potential military applications (Tart, 1978, 1979), but dealing effectively with such real problems will not be possible if our unacknowledged personal fears are unresolved. (Tart, 1984a, pp. 141–142)

I see conscious and unconscious fears of psi as a major problem but an understandable and solvable one. I hope others will join in the research needed for such understanding and solution. Then we will make more progress in understanding the vital, positive aspects of psi, which, for me, far outweigh the negative aspects focused on in this paper.

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