

Anna O.

The mysteries of the human personality have fascinated philosophers and scientists since men and women first walked the face of the planet. A lonely girl, for instance, starts out for the supermarket. But without being aware of what she is doing, she drives a mile out of her way to discover that she has parked in front of her best friend's house. Then there is Rob, who really meant it when he said he would never cut a psych class again today he has already left campus to do some personal errands, unable to keep his promise.



Why do these people act in ways that don't seem to make sense? Why do they keep on doing things that harm themselves and others? Until Sigmund Freud made his landmark discoveries in the 1890s, no one had a satisfactory answer to these questions. The workings of the personality seemed as mysterious as the far side of the moon.

Freud was a Viennese doctor who specialized in illnesses of the nervous system. As he worked with his patients, he gradually realized that some emotional force they weren't aware of and couldn't control was influencing their behavior. A woman named Anna O. (real name: Bertha Pappenheim), whom Freud never met, helped him find that hidden force.

Freud learned about Anna O. from his friend, Dr. Joseph Breuer. Anna's mother had called Dr. Breuer to treat the 21-year-old woman who was ill and refused to leave her bed. Before her breakdown, Anna had spent six months nursing her dying father. Her symptoms, Breuer discovered, included paralysis of her arms and legs, poor vision, some loss of speech and hearing, and a painful cough. Anna also suffered from hallucinations in which her father's face appeared to her as death's head. Over and over, Anna insisted that something was tormenting her.

Breuer was interested in the case of this beautiful, intelligent woman. As was his custom, he tried hypnosis as a means of treating her. Under hypnosis, Anna talked about the passionate fondness for her father. When she spoke of the difficult months of nursing him, she burst into tears, laughed wildly, and flew into terrible rages.

To Breuer's surprise, these emotional sessions led to a remarkable change. Afterward, Anna's mind would be perfectly clear. She would leave her bed and spend hours writing letters to friends. As Breuer wrote, "it was truly a remarkable contrast: in the daytime the irresponsible patient, pursued with hallucinations, and at night, the girl with her mind completely clear." At the same time, he found that her physical symptoms were also disappearing. Breuer concluded that by revealing her feelings, she was "taking away" the emotions that she had been unable to face during the long nights of caring for her father.

One by one, Anna's symptoms faded as their cause became clear. For example, her vision improved after she described a night when she had been sitting by her father's bed. As she thought about his dying, her eyes filled with tears. Just at that moment, he asked her to tell him what time it was. Not wanting him to know that she was crying, she ignored her tears. But in order to see her watch, she had to bring it close to her face, squinting as she did so. From that moment on the squint became permanent – and it was the squint that caused her poor vision.

Her hearing loss had begun when her brother caught her listening outside her father's bedroom. Angrily, he grabbed and shook her. Anna wanted to hit him back, but she was afraid of making a scene. Her partial deafness started that night. Similarly, her cough had begun the night she heard dance music while on duty beside her father's bed. The music reminded her of the fun she was missing. Briefly she daydreamed about going to a party. Then, just as quickly, she was swept by waves of guilt and remorse, for her daydream made her feel as though a part of her wanted to desert her father. The cough came as a welcome relief, for she could then say to herself, "no one with a cough like mine would go out to a party."

Unfortunately, Anna also transferred her affection for her father to Dr. Breuer. This forced him to break off her treatment, for his wife was jealous of the time he spent with Anna. His abrupt withdrawal from the case led to a relapse, and Anna had to be put in a sanitarium. She later recovered and went to live in Germany. There she became a pioneering feminist and a champion of progressive political and social causes. Freud remembered the case of Anna O. when he began treating his emotionally disturbed patients. He found that long-forgotten events usually lay at the root of their problems. In time, he traced these buried memories to a part of the mind he called the *unconscious*. The unconscious serves as a storehouse for powerful feelings, Freud decided. He also realized that the unconscious has the power to affect behavior. Anna O.'s physical symptoms, Freud concluded, grew out of her conflict over her father's illness. One part of her wanted to love and care for her father, but another part of her yearned to be free of the sickroom and the fear that he would die.

Freud turned his theories into a system of therapy called *psychoanalysis*. Freed of their unconscious conflicts, many patients recovered and returned to a normal life. In time, he also developed a consistent theory of personality and behavior based on psychoanalysis. Today, psychologists and psychiatrists trained in Freudian techniques still follow in the footsteps of a man who "shook the sleep of the world." Even though modern psychology does not accept all of Freud's ideas, any study of personality must consider his insights.