

Is there good evidence supporting the claims that people make to be able to contact the dead, or tell your fortune or see the future? Any careful, sustained observation of any of the myriad approaches out there, regardless of culture or modality, indicates that there is not.

There are occasional "hits" where chance, statistics, psychology, common experiences and sheer luck combine to make what sounds like a very compelling case. However, when you start to look at the factors involved, it usually becomes very clear, very quickly, that there is no more to it than those to-be-expected random factors.

The burden of proof rests on those making extraordinary claims. You have to ask is what this person is doing so extraordinarily compelling that we have to overturn all we think we know about how the universe works in order to explain it? Or are there other, simpler, more likely explanations.

There are general practices used by all psychics/mediums whatever their flavour (clairvoyants, astrologers, mediums, Western, Chinese, Indian, Amerindian etc). Magicians call it "cold reading" and know the techniques well, without claiming special powers.

Add to this an awareness of basic stereotypes and common experiences ("you had a special toy as a child", "you have money concerns", "you'd like to travel in the future", "you still think about a failed relationship"), and you can provide a very

compelling, apparently personalised, reading of even a total stranger or someone over the phone.

Anyone visiting a medium is clearly interested in contacting a dead loved one. So the medium's traditional opening line of "you have lost someone important to you - a relative or close friend" is hardly surprising. The visitor will then often respond eagerly with something like "yes, my mother" and this information is then used to build a convincing-sounding patter. This works whether the medium is a scam artist out to take some poor widow's nest egg, or someone who genuinely believes they are talking to spirits.

A psychic/fortune-teller/medium should be able to provide information that is:

- (1) detailed
- (2) surprising
- (3) definitive

Most make very general statements that can be readily "retranslated" because they fit a whole host of possible outcomes, and they pick things that happen all the time to improve their chances of being right. You can buy books with common statements and experiences to use: mention needles, and it can be interpreted as Granny's knitting, Uncle's hospital stay, Mother's embroidery or even Father's tattoos!

Wrong, Wrong, Wrong!

Every year the media runs psychic predictions for the year ahead. Checking these out shows that

a large proportion of predictions are wrong, even when not just plain silly, and none ever seem to include the huge news events of the year that are truly surprising

In 1997, psychics said Diana, Princess of Wales, would:

- be crowned Queen of England
- move to South Africa and train as a marathon runner for the 2000 Olympics
- gain vast amounts of weight
- marry again and have two more children

What they **didn't** predict was Diana's sudden shocking death.

For 2001, psychics predicted that:

- the US Supreme Court judges would all vanish
- the Mississippi River would form a new ocean
- Tipper Gore, the Vice-President's wife, would join the Taliban
- Pope John Paul II would die; his successor would be Italian

And the big story they missed -- the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York.

In 2004, psychics said:

- Osama bin Laden would die of kidney disease
- Saddam Hussein would be shot to death.
- Fidel Castro would die.
- Hollywood would be hit by a huge earthquake

What did the psychics miss? The massive Boxing Day tsunami which saw over 200,000 people die across a dozen countries.

The following year, 2005, saw the usual mix of the banal and bizarre, including that:

- terrorists would start World War III by shooting a nuclear missile into China
- a Nazi flag would be found on the dark [sic] side of the Moon
- the winner of a new reality TV show would gain fame by killing and eating a contestant
- the San Andreas Fault in California would have a massive rupture on June 17 with a death toll reaching 4,568,304

The last prediction was said to have been made by noted US psychic Edgar Cayce in 1941. As with previous years, California remained reasonably steady. However, the psychics missed the August arrival of Hurricane Katrina, with its devastating impact in the southern US, and failed to warn of the massive earthquake that hit Pakistan and India in October, killing 73,000 people.

People wonder why psychics get into this game. For the deliberately manipulative, it's the lure of easy money, low overheads, no responsibility or consumer protection comeback. For those who believe in their own talents, it's a desire to help people, as well as a big boost to the ego to think that you have special powers. In either case, they are exploiting vulnerable people.

Authors Ben Radford and Bob Carroll note that:

If psychic power existed...professions that involve deception would be worthless. There wouldn't be any need for undercover work or spies. Every child molester would be identified immediately. No double agent could ever get away with it. Psychics would be on demand for high paying jobs in banks, businesses and government, Most psychics would be very, very rich, and since psychics are such altruistic persons, giving up their time to help others talk to the deceased or figure out what to do with their lives, they would be winning lotteries right and left and giving part of their winnings to help the needy.

We wouldn't need trials of accused persons: psychics could tell us who is guilty and who is not.

Of course, the operative word here is IF. IF psychic power existed, the world would be very different.

Many groups and organisations, such as Wanaka's Puzzling World, have standing challenges for psychics to demonstrate their powers under controlled conditions., with big prizes available for their favourite charity. None have done so. But they still take money from the punters and claim special powers. Is that ethical?



the
new zealand
Skeptics
guide to

Psychics, Mediums and Fortune tellers

If there was something to psychics tapping into some form of spiritual after-life, or even a mass consciousness that extruded back from the future, then anyone with a pinch of psychic power should have warned Diana, Princess of Wales, not to get into that Mercedes.

After all, that death had HUGE emotional ramifications that should have promulgated through the ether like nothing else. Instead we had three of the "top" psychics in England the week before predicting she would marry again and find happiness...

Vicki Hyde, Chair-entity NZ Skeptics, and deemed a "highly accurate psychic" when demonstrating cold reading practices for TV.