

A&M psychologist describes idea incubation

By Melissa Naumann
Reporter

All students have experienced the frustrating phenomenon of taking a test, struggling with a question and then remembering the right answer while walking out of the classroom. It may seem like nothing but bad luck, but Dr. Steve Smith can explain the problem.

Smith, associate professor of psychology, studies the link between

memory and problem solving. "Sometimes an idea to solve a problem just pops in your head and you wonder where it came from," he said. "This is called insight or illumination."

While some people believe the unconscious mind steps in when the conscious mind can't solve a problem, Smith disagrees. He believes incubation is the key to eventual insight.

"Incubation in problem solving is like incubating an egg," he said. "If the egg is kept warm, something eventually pops out. We don't know what goes on inside, but something comes out. You can work on a problem and nothing works out. Later, when you're doing something else, the idea pops up. Incubation ends with insight."

He said insight can only occur when the problem isn't solved ini-

tially.

"My explanation is that this insight at the end of incubation wouldn't be described as an insight if you solved the problem on the first try," Smith said.

Smith focuses on why the problem-solving process is not immediate.

"Because we're generating wrong solutions, these wrong ideas become more accessible, easy to retrieve

from our memory," Smith said. "So at a certain point, all you can do is think of wrong solutions."

These wrong solutions block the correct solutions and make it more difficult for the right ideas to come through, he said.

"The correct approach is in there somewhere, but the memory of the incorrect ones are too strong," he said.

As time passes, the incorrect solu-

tions fade to let the correct solution come up, Smith said.

"Rather than the unconscious mind doing the work, you're just letting some memories wear off," he said.

Smith said this problem is like trying to remember a name.

"The more you try, the more you can't think of the right thing," he said. "This is analogous to memory."

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