

Do ghosts exist?

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Abstract

Ghost sightings can be caused by many factors. Some of them are due to using drugs under the classification of hallucinogens such as LSD and DMT, while others are caused by mental and medical conditions like Temporal Lobe Epilepsy. People who claim to see ghosts could have an undiagnosed condition and are too afraid to talk with a health care provider about what they have been seeing because they are worried people will turn them into a social outcast. Along with this there are other factors such as natural phenomenon that can cause a person to see things that are simply not there. For this reason, most believers live in fear of what might happen to them from ghosts the rest of their lives, where non-believers look for a rational explanation to what they have encountered. To this day, there simply is no evidence to prove that ghosts do exist.

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Do ghosts exist?

Since the early part of history, people have reported seeing ghosts. Reports of ghosts have been made by people of different religious backgrounds all over the world. Spirits, also known as ghosts, are said to be the soul of a person returning from the dead to haunt places they left behind (History.com). According to investigations into alleged hauntings, 38% of people now believe in ghosts, and 13% say they have seen a ghost (Wiseman & Watt, 2003). The issue between believers and non-believers is that those who believe in ghosts tend to live in fear of what a ghost might do to them. Although some individuals still believe ghosts exist, ghosts do not exist because there is no scientific evidence to support the existence of ghosts.

Many factors can contribute to a person claiming to see a ghost. One example is sleep paralysis. With a condition like sleep paralysis, the individual can experience hallucinations while either sleeping or awake. People who have claimed hauntings have often experienced a form of sleep paralysis (Mapes, 2009). People are more likely to experience this condition if they suffer from stress, anxiety, or the lack of sleep. When this happens, it feels very real to that person (Ward, 2007). The most common thing to see during sleep paralysis is a dark figure in the room. Another thing individuals will experience is being unable to move, the reason for this is because the brain wakes up before the body (Ward, 2007). Another condition that can cause this is Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE). Evidence shows that in the past, people who suffered from Temporal Lobe Epilepsy were thought to be possessed or received divine messages and visions from God (NPR News, 2009). TLE affects the nervous system and people with TLE experience seizures that can last 30 to 60 seconds. Because of this, an individual can claim to see things that are not there.

Arguably, believers would mention that just because a person sees a ghost does not mean they are suffering from sleep paralysis or Temporal Lobe Epilepsy. One example is a study done by the founders of the London Society for Psychical Research.

"[They] published their first case collection (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886), followed by the "census of Hallucinations" (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore, & Sidgwick, 1894), in which data were gathered from 17,000 people, of whom about 10% reported some sort of hallucinatory experience. Some reports were animals, and only 20% of the 830 realistic apparitions were recognizable as dead people (ghosts). This focus on "benign hallucinations" (from sane people) is important because such hallucinations differ from those associated with mental illness and drug states (Anderson & Anderson, 1982; Asaad & Shapiro, 1986)." (Parra, 2006).

In fact, the individuals say just because people see a ghost does not mean they are suffering from a psychological condition (Parra, 2006). The number of ghost sightings cannot all be linked to a medical condition or mental illness.

However, even though not all ghost sightings are caused by medical conditions, it does not mean they are not experiencing hallucinations from an undiagnosed condition. That is only one study and it does not prove the existence of ghosts. All it proves is that normal people can hallucinate. There are other reasons they could be seeing ghosts, such as unknown drug use or their brain is inserting things that are not there (Mapes, 2009). This is known as "active interpretation," and by using illusions, the human brain can be tricked into seeing things (Radboud University Nijmegen, 2014). "Someone will be doing some routine chore like polishing the furniture -they'll be in a near-reverie or daydream state – and they'll see something out of the corner of their eye," he says. "They'll turn and their mind will fill in the

blank -they'll see a Civil War soldier or a 'gray lady' -- and then it will promptly vanish." (Mapes, 2009). Doctors from the University of Glasgow in Scotland state that our brains construct complex jigsaw puzzles using any bit of information it can get ahold of such as our memories and senses (University of Glasgow, 2011). They also state that a person's brain does not only use what we see, but forms a complex prediction. In other words, a person's brain uses senses, memories, and other forms of information to guess what they are seeing (University of Glasgow, 2011). One example was the case of a little boy who claimed to see ghosts every night. He went to see a professional and it was found out it was caused by stress from moving (Fang & Eunjung, 2013). So, with the brain filling in the blanks, it is possible for individuals to see things that are not there.

In any case, believers would ask how to explain video evidence of ghosts. Even people who do not believe have trouble explaining the video proof. One such example is an article where the writer checked out videos and admitted that after seeing them, it made him second guess his beliefs (Blackwell, 2001). With video proof, non-believers cannot say it is the brain causing the ghostly image to be on the film that way. Along with that, believers mention that multiple people have seen ghosts on live camera feeds.

The next thing that can cause people to see ghosts is a hoax. The brain might not be the cause of the person seeing ghosts in that instance, but there are plenty of faked videos out there such as "balloon boy." Everybody thought it was real until people really started digging into the validity of the video. So, it is possible to make a fake video, pass it off as real, and if nobody questions it, then believers will say it is proof. One well known hoax is known as the Amityville Horror, where a man was said to have murdered his family and that they haunted the house. A few years after the reputed haunting that drove a couple from the house, the couple and another

man came forward and said they made the story up for money (Nickell, 1998). Another hoax is called spirit photography. This was done by William Mumler, who would use double exposure to get the desired effect: a ghostly outline standing or floating by people in the photo (Pemberton, 2015). As technology advances it will become easier to debunk these hoaxes.

Meanwhile, believers point out how hard it is to fake an EVP (electronic voice phenomenon) recording that has a ghost answering questions asked by individuals (McAdams, 2011). No doubt television programs, like "Sightings" by ShowTime that state they are based on real stories could be used as evidence to support that ghosts do exist (Wren, 2002). With that recording, believers say that it shows life continues after death, because it is a person that has passed on that is answering them.

However, EVP has flaws. For example, the tape recorders they use can pick up any electromagnetic interference, from a light bulb to refrigerators (Leung, 2008). Also, if it uses an internal microphone it can pick up the noise from the recorder itself (Leung, 2008). They are said to be recording radio interference and people create meaning out of random noises known as pareidolia (the belief that something obscure is real) or apophenia (connecting unrelated phenomena) (Watson, 2004). To clarify, EVP recordings are just picking up interference from sources inside where the investigators are recording.

Environmental phenomena are other things that can cause a person to see strange things that cannot be explained at the time. These are later explained by natural occurrences in our atmosphere. Some examples of environmental phenomenon include lightning caused by volcanic eruptions, fire tornados, and blood falls (Bartels, 2016). As humans learn more about the Earth, we will continue to discover new and fascinating phenomenon that we have not been able to explain.

On the other hand, individuals would say the likelihood of that phenomena happening indoors would be relatively low, and if it did, the chance of it causing ghosts to appear would be even lower. The only reported indoor phenomenon is raining indoors, which is caused by condensation build up forming drops. There were no leaks found in the ceiling of the building (Wolf, 2015). Since, indoor rain is the only known indoor phenomenon that this case spoke of, it does not explain indoor sightings of ghosts.

This argument still does not explain there are other things that can make people see ghosts indoors or hallucinate. Carbon monoxide poisoning can cause people to see ghosts and hear things (Interstate, 2015). Since it is odorless, colorless, and tasteless the individual may not know they are being poisoned. Another cause could be breathing in toxic mold (Wolf, 2015). Some effects of toxic mold include disorientation, hallucinations, and blurry vision. Additionally, drug use can cause a person to hallucinate. Certain drugs are categorized as hallucinogens by the federal government bath salts, DMT, peyote, and LSD fall under this category. Hallucinogens distort a person's view on time and space (Miller & Gold, 1994). Hallucinogens cause the person taking them to see things ranging from strange colors, demons walking around, to all sorts of other vision and strange things. Even when the drugs wear off, people can still have side effects that can cause them to see ghosts from a few days after taking them to years later.

Presumably, believers could state drug use could account for some sightings, but it doesn't explain people who have seen ghosts and never tried drugs in their life. How would individuals that do not believe explain sightings by a person who is of sound body and mind? Of course, believers could refer to the video evidence to support them by saying drugs had nothing to do with the video evidence, or the EVP recordings.

Just because an individual has never tried drugs does not prove that ghosts exist. As said before, there are multiple things that can cause a normal person to see ghosts like environmental phenomena, poisoning, and infrasound. Infrasound is too low for humans to hear, but we can feel them and they can cause hallucinations by vibrating the eyes enough to cause images of ghosts (Moore, 2013). Ghost sightings continue to this day, and many people have undiagnosed medical conditions that can contribute to the sightings as well as drug use, hoaxes, environmental phenomena, and more. People experiencing ghost sightings should ensure they are not suffering from a medical condition like sleep paralysis, Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, or other conditions that can cause them to see ghosts. There is no scientific proof that supports ghosts existing, but they can be produced by using technology and fooling people with hoaxes.

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