



The Skeptics SA guide to Ouija Boards

The name *ouija* is formed by combining the French and German words for Yes: *oui* and *ja*. In its simplest form a small circular table with a glass top, or polished surface is used. Numbers, the letters of the alphabet, and the words ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are written on pieces of paper and placed around the table’s circumference. An ordinary drinking glass is used as the planchette. Ouija boards come in various forms, but probably the best-known is the ‘board-game’ manufactured by Parker Bros in America, a flat polished wooden board some 30.5 by 46 centimeters with the alphabet and numbers across the top part, and with the words ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ below.

A small board — a planchette — usually triangular or heart shaped is also used. Either mounted on tiny wheels, or with a smooth surface, this enables the small board to slide freely over the surface of the main board, pointing to individual letters, numbers, or to ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Participants lightly place the tips of the right or left index fingers on the planchette or glass and take turns to ask questions of the board. Sometimes nothing happens, but other times the glass or planchette indicates specific letters or numbers. Quite often the ‘message’ is nothing more than a meaningless collection of

letters; sometimes however, actual words or messages are spelled out.

However, it should never be assumed that these messages have any form of supernatural origin: the fact is it comes as no surprise to psychologists that such messages occur. It is well known that the subconscious mind can use physical responses to reveal information that can even be hidden from the conscious level of our mind. This is known as an Ideomotor response. A common example is Chevreul’s Pendulum where a subject holding a pendulum, concentrates on holding it perfectly still. When the therapist suggests that the pendulum will start to move, from side-to-side, backwards and forwards, or even in a circle, invariably, despite the efforts of the subject to hold it still, the pendulum starts to move in the directions suggested.

This baffles most people. They cannot understand how, despite their concentrating on holding the pendulum still, it can move. The reason that the pendulum moves is that the suggestions by the therapist trigger tiny muscular movements, (an Ideomotor response), which are magnified by the pendulum. The movement of the planchette or glass on a ouija board is really this same involuntary move-

ment, being produced by one or more of the participants. The ouija board merely helps to facilitate the expression of material hidden within the subconscious.

This can often present a problem since the subconscious, which controls our memories, always has very good reasons for hiding such material; by suppressing such material it protects us from the mental stress associated with such traumatic memories. If these experiences are exposed too soon they can produce guilt, depression, fear, paranoia, self-hatred, even a nervous breakdown. The problem with recalling such material when using a ouija board is that:

- a) The individual is not actively seeking to recover such memories, and
- b) Ouija board sessions are rarely performed in the presence of a professional therapist so that there is no limit to the rate of recall. The subject can experience a full blown memory, and the amount of memory recall can be psychologically overwhelming.

There have been numerous claims of psychological traumas caused by using of ouija boards. Many of these are probably pure fiction, however, there is no doubt that there have been a number of factual incidents where

individuals have suffered serious psychological trauma as a result of playing with ouija boards. This is not to suggest that this happens to everyone. Most people, including adolescents, who use ouija boards experience no negative effects.

People who are attracted to regularly using ouija boards tend to be those already experiencing psychological problems, and they often form a serious psychological dependency upon these boards, seeking a means of 'divine' guidance. Unfortunately, for such individuals, the ouija board can often trigger major traumas, a situation usually worsened if the individual is also using drugs, legal or otherwise.

The trouble is that, as we explained, the board is merely magnifying their own hidden thoughts, they come to depend upon 'solutions' to their problems which are coming from their own disturbed mind. So, for instance, if the individual is considering suicide, then the board merely serves to magnify those very suggestions, and that can often lead to suicide, or at the least a major breakdown.

In one television program on ouija boards it was claimed that a group of truck-drivers who became involved in using a ouija board ended up driving erratically, claiming that 'voices' were telling them to drive on the wrong side of the road and crash head-on into cars. Interestingly, a few months before an interstate driver had deliberately veered onto the wrong side of the road, killing several people. He claimed afterwards that he heard voices in his head telling him to kill the people coming towards him.

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On the same week that the television show was shown, a coronial inquest in Adelaide was hearing evidence from a number of interstate drivers who admitted that because of the long trips they made they were encouraged to use pep-pills to stayawake, and that after 30-40 hours without sleep they started to imagine all sorts of strange things.

So it is obvious that there are often other reasons for people experiencing these delusions, and that they have nothing to do with the ouija board.

Many incredible claims are made concerning ouija boards; for instance it is widely claimed that the messages emerging from these boards originate with Satan or evil spirits. This is complete nonsense. We have previously explained the origins of the messages: they come from within the individual, and not from any external source.

Ouija boards have become scapegoats for a variety of irrational human behavior, however the ouija board is only an instrument in the process. Acting as a release mechanism the board enables powerful psychological forces to be unleashed from within the individual.

While this is not a problem for the majority of people using these boards, problems can arise if the user is emotionally immature, personally insecure, or experiencing psychological trauma, for those reasons ouija boards should be avoided.

If someone you know, has already become 'hooked' on these boards, especially if they

have had any disturbing psychological experiences when using them, you should encourage them to seek professional assistance.

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