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What Can Magicians Teach Us about the Brain?

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Neuroscience can learn a lot by tapping the intuitive knowledge of magicians as new sources for inspiration and study.

A magician tosses a ball into the air once, twice, three times. Suddenly, the ball vanishes in mid-flight. What happened?

Don't worry, the laws of physics haven't been broken. Magicians do not have supernatural powers; rather, they are masters of exploiting nuances of human perception, attention, and awareness. In light of this, a recent Nature Reviews Neuroscience paper, coauthored by a combination of neuroscientists (Stephen L. Macknik, Susana Martinez-Conde, both at the Barrows Neurological Institute) and magicians (Mac King, James Randi, Apollo Robbins, Teller, John Thompson), describes various ways magicians manipulate our perceptions, and proposes that these methods should inform and aid the neuroscientific study of attention and awareness.

