

Newsweek

Sound Too Good To Be True?

Behind The Boom In Subliminal Tapes

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Rob Gregory wanted to do better at his job selling used factory-ventilation systems in Kansas City. So three years ago he bought a "subliminal" audiotape called "Unconditional Love." All Gregory heard was "some synthesized music and weird gongs." But buried beneath the sounds, supposedly, were inaudible messages subconsciously persuading him to feel better about other people. It worked, he says. His sales went up because "people sense if you really care." Encouraged, he bought another tape, this one called "Stop Hair Loss." He says he soon stopped losing his hair. Now Gregory, 30, owns 15 different improvement tapes--none of whose "hidden" messages he can hear. "Subliminals are both practical and spiritual," he says. "They're a smorgasbord for human potential."

Sound too good to be true? Not to the millions of people snapping up subliminal tapes that promise to help them shed weight or regain faith in God. Sales have doubled since 1985, and this year cassettes are expected to bring in \$50 million, mostly from middle-class buyers under 45. Once sold only through the mail by small New Age firms, subliminals are now found in chain bookstores. At least 20 publishers including Bantam, Simon & Schuster and Random House have jumped into the business. "The whole idea that a \$9.95 tape can change your life and you don't have to do anything seems so absurd," says Harriet Pironti, a spokesperson for Random House. "But it's the American way."

The tapes are said to work because their "messages" bypass conscious defense mechanisms. One hears only music or relaxing sounds; underneath, encouraging words are "embedded" at decibel levels perceived only subconsciously. Some manufacturers even speed up messages to a blur or run them through electronic filters to disguise them further. An audible voice at the start of "How To Be Popular," one of more than 170 titles from Potentials Unlimited of Grand Rapids, Mich., says, "The messages will enter your subconscious . . . so that changes will take place in your life as they should: without effort without thought, without strain." Ocean waves and aimless harp music well up, the voice vanishes; results are guaranteed in 30 days.

The top sellers are cassettes to lose weight or quit smoking, from there the world is at your earlobes. Single and lonely? Get "How To Attract Love." Or maybe it's time for "Divorce--Yes." For other vital concerns, there is "Agoraphobia," "Freedom From Acne," "Winning at the Track" and "I Am a Genius." Credence Cassettes of Kansas City, Mo., offers tapes designed to "correct and heal . . . concepts of God that are negative, distorted or even hostile." Inmates at Utah's South Point Prison use one called "Pedophilia" to quell criminal impulses; Texas Rangers pitchers use custom-made cassettes to increase confidence. Kids' tapes, such as "I am a Great Reader," are popular, says Patricia Mounter, owner of Mind Mint, a Salt Lake City self-help store. "Prenatal mothers play it to the fetus and the kids come out more intelligent and walk sooner," she claims. "Positive Thoughts for Children" offers the sounds of a seashore and, somewhere in there, the assurance: "I am loved."

One needs no scientific credentials to make tapes. Potentials Unlimited president and chief "hypnotherapist" Barrie Konicov, 51, whose soothing voice is heard on his firm's cassettes, sold aluminum hair curlers, fire alarms and life insurance (his license was yanked in 1973 for forgery) before discovering self-help tapes in 1977. A federal judge once summed up Konicov's qualifications as a degree in marketing and "approximately three weekend seminars on hypnosis." Potentials Unlimited sells a million tapes a year, mostly through chains like Barnes & Noble.

Subliminal cassettes generate ridicule as well as riches. They're "worthless trash," says Brooklyn

College psychology professor Arthur Reber. "People want to make their lives better by some kind of magical pseudoscience." Most psychologists, while acknowledging that experiments show people can sometimes process sounds or sights so slight they can't be consciously perceived, say there's no evidence such stimuli change lives. Even the advertising industry, which flirted with the tantalizing idea of subliminal manipulation in the 1950s, has long since abandoned the concept as ineffective.

In some cases, the tapes may be no more than a placebo. In three recent studies at the University of Washington and the University of California, San Jose, volunteers went home with popular tapes designed to improve their memory or self-esteem. After a month, tests detected no measurable improvement. Yet many subjects believed they'd made progress. "Any time you get off your butt to improve yourself, you'll probably see results," says Eric Eich, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia who is leading a study of subliminals for the National Research Council. "If you just spent money on a tape, you'll claim it helped."

Unproven products: Placebos used as medical cures are not necessarily innocuous, however. "People might use unproven products like this and not get professional help," says Robert Reyna, a Texas assistant attorney general investigating several companies. In 1984 a federal judge ordered Potentials Unlimited to erase copies of 31 different cassettes claiming relief for ailments ranging from high blood pressure to warts. (Potentials still markets many of the same titles with slightly reworded claims.) Since last July the federal Food and Drug Administration has warned at least two other firms to stop implying that their tapes can address illnesses such as arthritis, cancer and AIDS.

Undeterred by criticism, the tape makers are constantly striving to open new technological frontiers. Next month Valley of the Sun Publishers of Malibu, Calif., will begin marketing a range of ultra-high frequency "Silent Subliminals" that, in addition to the inaudible subliminal message, have no audible background sound whatsoever. "You won't hear anything at all," says Valley of the Sun's Sharon Boyd. "It'll be like a dog whistle going straight into your brain."

BLAMING DEATH ON HIDDEN MESSAGES

The darker side of subliminal suggestion is under scrutiny this month in a Reno, Nev., court. The families of two men are suing CBS Records and the heavy-metal band Judas Priest, alleging that embedded comments on one of the group's records spurred them to shoot themselves.

Raymond Belknap, 18, and James Vance, 20, led troubled lives, which included brushes with police and fleeing from home. On Dec. 23, 1985, they were in Belknap's bedroom listening to the Judas Priest album "Stained Class," drinking beer and smoking marijuana. Though the defendants deny it, the plaintiffs' experts say that under the violent lyrics were the messages "Do it" and "Let's be dead." Late in the day the two made a suicide pact, ripped apart the room and then went to a nearby playground with a sawed-off shotgun. Belknap killed himself; Vance blew off his face from the eyes down. Three years later he fell into an unexplained coma and died.

Judge Jerry Whitehead ruled before the trial that hidden messages are not covered by the First Amendment, as they "are intended to influence . . . the listener without his knowledge."

Psychoanalyst Howard Shevrin, a plaintiff's witness, said that given the pair's "predispositions," the record could have crystallized suicidal impulses. "The effects of subliminals are unpredictable," he said. "You're fooling around with powerful unconscious forces." The plaintiffs plan to bring in a computer to discern the alleged messages.

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