What is the Unconscious Mind?

First, what is the unconscious mind anyway? Is it a storage unit full of scary, negative and bad memories? Yes, they are in there, and they are important, but they are not most of it. Most of our unconscious mind is very positive. Not only does it have all the happy memories, but it can help us every day as we process and integrate the most important events into our minds and use them to create our dream life.

Second, how does the unconscious do it? Subliminal perception experiments show how our unconscious starts turning these events into images almost immediately after an event takes place. I will describe how the process works, referring first to the experiments done in the early 19th century by Potzl using a tachistoscope.

Howard Shevrin’s 2003 book includes reprints of Charles Fisher’s experiments from the 1950’s in subliminal perception. Shevrin states:

“Perhaps Fisher’s finest contribution to psychoanalytic theory is his proposed revision of the theory of dream formation....Fisher discovered that his subjects’ images were in many respects as dreamlike in nature as their dreams. And yet these images were obtained only minutes after the exposure of the subliminal stimulus. These images appeared to contain evidence for the activation of powerful unconscious wishes and dreamlike primary process condensations....” Shevrin gives an example: “[T]he subject’s initial impression of the subliminal stimulus already manifested the influence of unconscious forces. The stimulus was a colored photograph of two Siamese cats and a parakeet perched between them. Following the 1/100 sec exposure, the subject reported seeing two animals resembling dogs or pigs. However, when she attempted to draw the dogs or pigs, the animals turned out to look like peculiar combinations of mammal-like bodies and bird-like heads and tails. Although the subject was an artist, she complained that she had to draw the animals that way almost compulsively despite her intention to do otherwise” (p. 17-18).

Shevrin emphasizes that Fisher proposed that the mind registered many stimuli preconsciously during the day that “provided the main source of day residues. These day residues had already been influenced by unconscious wishes and revealed primary process transformations. They were, in a sense, ready-made dream contents primed to be taken advantage of during the night when another current of unconscious influence would play upon them, and stitch them into the developing dream fabric” (p. 19).

We have four or five dreams each night, lasting from ten to forty minutes. We don’t even have to remember them to notice how we feel when we wake up. The integration takes place anyway. Our unconscious then can help us with an important decision when we “sleep on it” and notice how we feel when we wake up the next day.
Finally, how do we solve problems using this information? If we remember even part of a dream, an image, all the better, because we can think about it, either by ourselves in a meditation or we can talk about it with another person.

We could even form our own dream study group, and Montague Ullman’s *Appreciating Dreams* is a detailed guide about how to do that. We could also work with a therapist to learn more about dreams and solve some problems along the way. Dreams offer creative solutions to all kinds of problems, as scientists, artists and writers have discovered.