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Description

Would you notice if someone stopped you on the street to ask directions, then suddenly turned into someone else? Most people wouldn't, reports Dateline's Chris Hansen, because of something called "Change Blindness."

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"Change Blindness: When Seeing Isn't Always Believing." Chris Hansen, correspondent. NBC Today
Change Blindness: When Seeing Isn’t Always Believing

MEREDITH VIEIRA, co-host:
You’ve heard the expression ‘you can’t always believe what you see and hear.’ Well, Dateline NBC’s Chris Hansen recently put that theory to the ultimate test. Chris, good morning to you.

CHRISS HANSEN reporting:
Good morning, Meredith. We’re about to demonstrate how our eyes might not be as reliable as we think, how we can fail to see something that should be obvious. Imagine a woman asking for directions, who suddenly turns into a man. Think you’d notice?

AMY: Excuse me. I’m sorry. Can you help me?
HANSEN: This woman, Amy, is asking a random person on the street for directions. Without warning, they’re rudely interrupted by a gigantic poster of me.

Unidentified Woman #1: Where is it?
HANSEN: The man doesn’t notice he’s now speaking to a different person.
Woman #1: It’s--and Sixth?
Unidentified Man #1: Take 20--or 15 blocks that way.
Unidentified Woman #2: Can you help me?
HANSEN: Watch, we’ll do it again. A woman starts asking for directions. Here comes the poster.
Woman #2: Wait--but where am I right now? Ow.
HANSEN: And now a man takes her place. Our subject looks puzzled for a second, but continues to give directions.

Unidentified Man #2: This is 50th Street. Grand Central…
Unidentified Man #3: Right.

Man #2: …is five block down.
Man #3: Alright.

HANSEN: Now it’s my turn to give it a try.
Dateline Intern: Do you know how to get to Union Square?
Unidentified Woman #3: Yes.
HANSEN: A Dateline intern starts asking for directions.
Woman #3: Go to Times Square. Actually from here this is...
HANSEN: Then I step in. Will she notice I took his place?
Woman #3: Walk that way.
HANSEN: She keeps right on giving directions.
Woman #3: Two avenues.
HANSEN: How is this possible? Psychologist Michael Shermer explains.
Dr. MICHAEL SHERMER: This is an example of change blindness where you do not expect something that big to happen in the environment, that kind of change because that never happens.
VIEIRA: So he calls it change blindness.
HANSEN: Change blindness, yeah.
VIEIRA: And you brought one more example of this?
HANSEN: Well, we do have it--I mean, we call this change blindness but this last clip we show you, they're quick encounters on the street corner. But what would happen if there was a switcheroo in a tight quarters area, during the middle of a date, for instance, and Mr. Right turned into someone else?
Onspeeddating.com has invited us to set up our cameras and shoot tonight's speed-dating event at The Watering Hole in New York City.
Unidentified Woman #4: Everyone here is going to meet everyone here.
HANSEN: But this man's speed dates will be a little unusual because a few minutes after each date begins he's going to switch places with another man, Spencer.
ERIN: Hi. How are you?
SPENCER: How you doing?
ERIN: I'm great.
SPENCER: I'm Jeff.
ERIN: Erin.
HANSEN: Spencer excuses himself.
SPENCER: Give me one second, I'll be right back. I'm so sorry.
ERIN: Yeah.
HANSEN: And she doesn't seem too pleased. When the other man comes back and sits down...
Unidentified Man #4: Sorry, Erin.
ERIN: Oh, that's OK.
Man #4: Anyway.
HANSEN: Apparently she doesn't have any idea that she's now sitting across from a completely different man.
Man #4: I'm not really into the whole writing down names.
ERIN: I'm not either.
HANSEN: Now let's see what happens when we switch women in the middle of a date.
AMY: This is definitely...
Unidentified Man #5: You have awesome eyes.
AMY: Oh, thank you, thank you.
HANSEN: Will he notice that the awesome hazel eyes he's been looking at will soon be blue?
AMY: Could you excuse me just one minute?
Man #5: You can do whatever you want to do.
AMY: I'll be right back, I promise.
Man #5: No problem. What's up?
Woman #1: I'm sorry.
Man #5: No, it--no, it happens. So I'm putting when they leave after the first minute it's probably not the best sign.
Woman #1: Uh-oh. I lost points?
HANSEN: He has no idea he's now speaking to a different woman with different color eyes.
Man #5: Yeah, it was lovely to meet you, Doris. Thank you.
HANSEN: I mean, it's hard to make it up. And it's funny stuff but it has serious consequences.
VIEIRA: Serious--yeah.
HANSEN: This is why pilots who are looking at their laptops for their schedules forget about everything else and overfly their destination. It's why we get into accidents, it's why we make notoriously bad criminal witnesses at trial.
VIEIRA: But what causes it to happen?
HANSEN: It's a couple of things; one, if something happens that we don't anticipate, we don't necessarily pick up on it.
VIEIRA: Yeah.
HANSEN: And in this world where we're on BlackBerrys and cell phones and we're talking to 20 people at the same time, you miss stuff. I mean, we did another one where a guy comes in to take a survey, one woman hands him the sheet, she bends down to give him something else and another woman comes up, no one noticed. We got gutsy with it, we used a 60-year-old woman and a 20-year-old woman, still the guy didn't get it. I had to show him the video so he believed it.
VIEIRA: Well, you said in the dating sequence women were more likely to pick up on it than men.
HANSEN: That's true.
VIEIRA: Why is that?
HANSEN: Well, a couple different reasons, I think sometimes women focus on the eyes and men focus perhaps elsewhere.
VIEIRA: Somewhere else. Yeah, I have a funny feeling that's it. By the way, what happened to your eye?
HANSEN: It looks worse than it is. I just had a little accident and it should clear up in the next couple of days.
VIEIRA: OK, good, good.