

DISCOVER

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BRAIN DAMAGE CAN MAKE YOU BRILLIANT

What if you could become a savant for a few minutes? Australian National University neuroscientist Allan Snyder says you can. Snyder induced instantaneous “jelly-bean counting” skills in normal people using transcranial magnetic stimulation. He used the powerful magnetic pulses to zap the brains of 12 volunteers, disrupting activity in the left anterior frontal lobe, an area where damage is known to cause sudden savant syndrome. For an hour or so after treatment, 10 of the volunteers were twice as accurate in guessing at a glance the

number of dots flashed on a computer screen. “This is an extraordinarily good result—I’m amazed it came out so well,” Snyder says.

When Snyder used the same technique three years ago to induce episodes of savantlike artistic ability in ordinary people, skeptics objected to his claims, saying that artistic abilities were too subjective to judge. But numbers don’t lie, says Eric Wassermann of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. “There’s nothing that looks bogus about it.”

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