

**GURPS**

Fourth Edition

# PSIONIC CAMPAIGNS™



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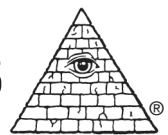
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*An e23 Sourcebook for GURPS®*

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

Stock #37-0135

Version 1.0 – April 2010



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# INTRODUCTION

Psi is a potent spice that can add flavor to any genre. Psionic abilities can be dropped into a wide range of campaigns, from the historical to the far future, and from the grittiest conspiracy story to the most over-the-top supers game.

Regardless of the underlying setting, games featuring psi have common needs and issues. The GM must make decisions about what psi is, how it works, and what purpose it serves in his particular game. Players need this information as well, to make psis who fit into (and make sense in) the setting. **GURPS Psionic Campaigns** offers help with these needs, along with campaign ideas, tweaks to help psi model fiction, and answers to questions like “How do I challenge a group that can read minds and see the future?”

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

This book requires the **GURPS Basic Set** to use. Both **GURPS Psionic Powers** and **GURPS Powers** are recommended, though not strictly necessary. This book references rules and advice found in both and uses the former as the default assumption for several examples; for clarity, abilities from **Psionic Powers** are always expressed in **boldface**. Readers may also find the psychotronics in **GURPS Ultra-Tech** and the campaign suggestions in **GURPS Supers** useful.

### *GURPS Psionic Powers*

For those without **Psionic Powers**, the following information should keep the examples in this book clear.

The powers in the **Basic Set** (pp. B254-257) have been expanded to 10: *Anti-Psi* (defenses and countermeasures against psi); *Astral Projection* (the ability to see, interact with, and visit

the astral plane); *Ergokinesis* (control over electromagnetic energy, allowing command of computers, electricity, and light); *ESP* (perceiving things without using one’s normal senses); *Probability Alteration* (using subtle influence to affect how likely things are to happen); *Psychic Healing* (repairing and preventing damage to the body); *Psychic Vampirism* (feeding on the energy of others); *Psychokinesis* (affecting kinetic energy); *Telepathy* (direct mind-to-mind contact); and *Teleportation* (movement without traversing the space in between). Each power has many predefined abilities, each of which requires a skill (*Psionic Skills*, p. 12); for example, *Psychic Hunches* is an *ESP ability* that lets a psi make accurate guesses by rolling against his *Psychic Hunches skill* (bought separately).

## PUBLICATION HISTORY

While **Psionic Campaigns** does not incorporate any previous **GURPS** books, some of the campaign advice within was influenced by **GURPS Psionics** (for Third Edition) and **GURPS Powers**.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Jason “PK” Levine has been a **GURPS** fanatic for nearly two decades and the assistant **GURPS** line editor for a small percentage of that time. He is the author of **GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 5: Allies** and **GURPS Psionic Powers**, and co-author of the **GURPS Creatures of the Night** series and **GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 10: Taverns**. He runs a **GURPS** fan site ([www.mygurps.com](http://www.mygurps.com)) and lives in north Georgia with his wonderful wife, a few cats and dogs, and several hundred Transformers.

## About GURPS

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*Errata.* Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all **GURPS** releases, including this book, are available on our website – see above.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

# STARTING CONDITIONS

There's no rule saying that the GM has to put any restrictions on psi – “buy whatever you can afford” is a valid instruction in *GURPS*. However, if the heroes are supposed to be people first and psis second, it may be better for the campaign to impose some reasonable limits.

## POWER LEVEL

When setting the starting power level (p. B487) for a game, it can be helpful for the GM to mentally separate the points he envisions people spending on mundane traits from the points he sees them spending on psi. This helps prevent a disconnect between how he envisioned the PCs and how the players create them.

*Example:* Cliff is going to run a “commandos with psi” game, so he tells his players to build on 150 points – enough to build a reasonably skilled commando. He figures any points spent on psi are a wash, as far as effectiveness goes. When the game starts, the party is full of commandos who spent around 90 points on attributes, skills, etc., and 60 points on psi. While the psionics do prove useful, the commandos lack the basic skills and abilities to make it through Cliff's first adventure in one piece. Oops!

Psionics can substitute for *some* missing skills or abilities, but not all. With many games, the best approach is to think of psi as an add-on – treating the group as “X-point heroes with Y points of psi.” For example, if Cliff expected fully skilled commandos who also had a small measure of psi, he should have considered them 150-point heroes with 50 points of psi, and run a 200-point game.

It's important for the GM to communicate this to the players when the game starts. It can be as casual as saying, “Build 150-point investigators, and try to spend around a third of it on psi,” or as restrictive as setting strict spending limits, like “Build 105-point investigators with only mundane traits, and then add 45 points in psionic abilities, Talent, and skills.”

Knowing how much psi to allow can be tricky. As a general guideline, the power levels listed on p. B487 apply well to psi campaigns if you *halve* the points. That is, spending 13-25 points on psionics gives you an “average” psi, spending 100-150 points on it gets you a “larger-than-life” psi, and so on. Thus, a 150-point hero needs to add about 75 points' worth of psi to be both a hero *and* an equally heroic psi. This does not include the cost of any Unusual Background (see below) required by the GM.

## RANGE OF ABILITIES

In a game focused on psionic development, it can be unrealistic for some of the psis to start with multiple powers and a handful of abilities for each. Therefore, *if* it fits the campaign, the GM may wish to impose some starting limits. In some games, especially those where psi is not the focus, these limits can even be imposed throughout the game.

### One Ability

Psis can have only one psionic ability (and only one power, of course). This can help keep players from feeling overwhelmed when creating a psi, though some may chafe at the lack of versatility. As a compromise, the GM may allow them to buy additional *latent* abilities (p. 14), to be developed as the campaign goes on.

## Unusual Background (Psi)

In a game where psionics are uncommon enough to count as a surprise, the GM may require psis to take an Unusual Background (UB). This covers the “unfair” advantage of having mental powers in a world where most people do not (and will not commonly be expecting their use). The following steps may be used to approximate a fair UB. This is completely optional, however; these guidelines exist to *help* the GM's decision, not to replace it.

After taking all the factors below into consideration, if the UB ends up 0 or less, there is no need for a psionic UB in this game. Note that the GM may choose to require a *separate* UB for access to specific powers or abilities (e.g., in addition to the UB to be a psi, teleporters may need an *extra* 10-point UB), but this is a campaign-specific decision.

1. Consider what the public knows about psi – see *Public Awareness* (pp. 16-18) for more. If psi is completely unknown, the base UB is 30 points. Suspected psi is 15 points; denied is 5 points; and acknowledged is 0 points.
2. Consider how common psi is – see *Frequency* (pp. 15-16) for details. Very rare adds 10 points; rare or

uncommon adds 5 points; common adds 0 points; very common *subtracts* 5 points; and ubiquitous *subtracts* 10 points.

3. (*Optional*) Consider any limits on power – see *Starting Conditions* (above) for suggestions. If the PCs are limited to spending less than 1/5 of their points on psionic abilities, skills, and Talent, subtract 10 points.

4. (*Optional*) If starting characters can only buy latent powers, *either* subtract 15 points *or* halve the final cost of the UB (rounding down to the nearest 5 points), whichever makes it smaller.

*Example:* Beth is running a psi-sci-fi game where psis are denied and rare, and players will spend about half of their characters' points on psionics. The UB is (5+5), or 10 points.

*Example:* John is running an adolescent psi game where psis are completely unknown and uncommon, and will only start off with a single level of Talent (as a latent power), which will cost *far* less than 1/5 of their points. The UB is (30+5-10-15), or 10 points.

## Acknowledged

Psi exists and everyone knows it. (Well, there are a few disbelievers, but they're looked at the same way as those who still insist that the Earth is flat.) It's been demonstrated for the media, and the government has openly acknowledged it. Parapsychology (and possibly psychotronic research) is a valid scientific field.

The biggest decision involved with this option is "For how long?" A world that has come to terms with the existence of psi last week is very different from one that's known about psi for several centuries. In general, the longer psi has been known, the more casual society's attitude is toward it.

Having psi openly acknowledged brings up more questions about the world. Do psychotronics exist? If so, how available are they? (This can vary; tech stores may sell a **Psionic Shield** 4 headband off the shelf, while only a written order from the president can get you a one with power 12.) Is psionic aptitude tested for? If so, when? (Most countries will do it either in school or when reaching the legal age of adulthood.) Are psis drafted into a particular occupation or forbidden from one? (Many settings draft all psis into the armed forces; some forbid them from holding political office.) The GM may want to consider the public's reaction to psis (below) when determining how they fit into the world.

## Secret (Psi)

Depending on public awareness (pp. 17-18), psis may be required to take a Secret. To determine the value of this disadvantage, decide what traits the psi gains if people discover the truth. First, consider the effects of the public's reaction (pp. 18-19), and then add any of the following, if applicable.

*Duty:* Psis may be forced to serve in the military, or to do other service for their country. For a person in hiding, this Duty is Involuntary.

*Enemies:* If psionics are unknown, scientists may kidnap a discovered psi so that he can be probed and experimented upon by them. This is Enemy (Medium group; 6 or less; Hunter) [-10] for most psis, or (9 or less) [-20] if psis are also especially rare.

*Loss of Social Advantages:* If being "outed" would cause the psi to lose Status, Wealth, etc., treat that as a disadvantage for these purposes.

Total the traits; if they end up positive, or no worse than -5 points, the Secret is a quirk. Otherwise, halve their value, and round to the nearest value of Secret (-5, -10, -20, or -30 points).

*Example:* In a modern psi game, psionic abilities are suspected (pp. 16-17) and psis are somewhat feared (p. 18). All known psis have Social Stigma (Second-Class Citizen) [-5] and the Enemy listed above on a 6 or less [-10]. In addition, the average citizen is Comfortable; being outed forces a person to work menial or "gray market" jobs, losing that advantage [-10]. This comes to a total of -25 points. Halving -25 produces -12.5, which is closest to Secret (Utter Rejection) [-10].

## PUBLIC REACTION

Everyone will have a different reaction when meeting someone with psionic abilities, but it's possible to generalize how the average citizen will feel. If psi is secret, this is a question of how most people will react when they discover the truth. If psi is openly known, this decision is the same as determining the status of *any* minority group (in the majority's eyes).

### Fear

Unfortunately, fear is one of humanity's most common reactions to anything truly *different*. If psis are a minority, this can lead to persecution – from insults and snubbing to bashing and lynching. In general, known psis in a world that fears them have a Social Stigma. This is most often Social Stigma (Minority Group), but this can vary; psis that are only slightly feared may have Social Stigma (Second-Class Citizen), while those in a world that sees them as inhuman may have Social Stigma (Monster). This may be combined with a loss of Status or Wealth, if society has a "glass ceiling" that keeps psis "in their place."

If psis are not a minority, or if the average psi is (or is considered to be) powerful enough to single-handedly take on an entire lynch mob without blinking, known psis may have levels of Social Regard (Feared) instead! While people may talk trash about the psi after he's gone, they'll defer to him when present and avoid making trouble out of fear that he may scramble their brains or set them on fire.

Note that many people are especially afraid of telepaths – to some, the thought of being picked up, having their future scanned, or getting teleported against their will is annoying, but the idea of having their thoughts read or (even worse) altered is terrifying! Campaigns in which this is true can use this new Social Stigma:

*Telepath:* You are a known telepath; people believe that you can read and control minds, regardless of your actual capabilities. You receive -1 to reactions from normal folk; in some games, this even includes other (nontelepathic) psis. This reaction penalty becomes -2 from anyone who has a reason to believe you may use your ability on him. *If* the setting requires all psis to take a Social Stigma, or Social Regard (Feared), you may have that trait as well. -5 points.

### Acceptance

The world may just treat psis as a normal part of society. This is most likely if psionic abilities have been openly acknowledged (above) for a long time. In such a setting, psis do not have to take any special traits to reflect their social standing. Most people react to psis normally, with those who have relevant Intolerances or quirks being the exception.

### Deference

In some societies (especially far-future utopias and dystopias), psionic power may be seen as a sign of intelligence, implying that psis are smarter or otherwise more competent than the average person. This can lead to a world in which psis are the natural leaders.

## ACHILLES' HEEL

Psis with godlike power can be – frankly – *boring*. When no one can stand in the psi's way, it becomes hard for the GM to come up with challenging and fun adventures. One way to mitigate this is by adding a weakness in the form of a disadvantage or limitation. This may be something with an in-game justification (e.g., something built into the psi by his creators), but it's more often just a meta-game concept added to keep the PC interesting.

Appropriate disadvantages are those that limit the psi's "targets" or provide others with a way to indirectly influence the person's actions and choices. This includes Code of Honor, Compulsive Behavior (e.g., psis raised via virtual training may have Compulsive Video-Game Playing limited to games that resemble their "childhood"), Dependency (commonly a rare psychotropic drug), Dependents, Dread (of something that

emits detectable waves of energy), Fanaticism, Honesty, Maintenance, Obsession, Pacifism (one common variant is Total Nonviolence, but only for one large class, -60%, or small class, -80%, of people), Phobias, Secret (though blackmail is rarely fun!), Sense of Duty, Susceptible (often to a particular chemical or drug), or Vow.

For limitations, Accessibility is often the best choice. However, instead of putting the same Accessibility on everything, consider using it to *split up* the psi's choices. Adding "Not versus women" to half of the psi's offensive abilities and "Not versus men" to the other half can limit his options enough to keep things interesting without taking away his "godlike" status. Other appropriate limitations include Costs Fatigue or Limited Use (both of which force the psi to ration his abilities), Preparation Required or Takes Recharge (to force "downtime"), Trigger, and Unreliable.

## Telepaths and Mental Screens

A more specific version of "irresistible psi" is that of the telepath living in a world where the average person broadcasts his thoughts (loudly) without being aware of it. The poor psi must keep his *own* mental screens up to avoid hearing everything and being overwhelmed by it.

This can be represented by taking Mind Reading or **Telereceive** with both the Reflexive (+40%) enhancement and the Uncontrollable (-10%) limitation. Reflexive turns the ability into a passive one. The GM should make a single roll against the telepath's skill (applying the Rule of 16) each time he encounters a new group of people. If he fails, he won't pick up any thoughts; otherwise, note the margin of success. As NPCs experience particularly intense thoughts, make a Will roll for them. If their margin of success is *less* than the telepath's, he picks up a mental snippet.

Normally, Uncontrollable wouldn't cause any particular embarrassment or inconvenience when applied to Mind Reading; unless someone detects the psi, it's a very unobtrusive ability. To make the limitation worth the point break, when the psi loses control, he starts reading *everyone* around him, experiencing the effects of Supersensitive (p. B158). If he already has Supersensitive, double the range *and* penalties.

### Constant Projectors

If the setting demands telepaths who can pick up *everything* going on around them – in other words, the subjects shouldn't be able to resist – also apply the suggestions for *Irresistible Psi* (p. 26) and have the telepath buy a very high level of Talent or skill. An average margin of success of around 20 (which suggests a skill in the low 30s) is impossible for any normal person to match.

Alternatively, the campaign world could simply reflect the truth – that the average person cannot control his thoughts. To reflect this, the Easy to Read disadvantage, with the new Psychic Only enhancement (below), can be considered part of the "standard human template"; assume that every NPC has it unless he's specifically bought it off.

This shifts things from a particular talent on the psi's part to a general failing in humanity. Be aware of the implications when making this change; it "downgrades" the average person even further with respect to psis!

With this change, the GM must decide who can buy off Easy to Read; can anyone who makes the effort do so, only psis, or only telepaths? Do any of these groups require an Unusual Background? It's possible, for example, to have a campaign where telepaths can (and in fact *must*) buy it off, while nontelepathic psis can do so by paying a 5-point Unusual Background, and normal people are stuck with it.

### Easy to Read

see p. B134

If everyone starts with this trait, it shouldn't count against any disadvantage limit; in essence, buying it off is like purchasing a 10- or 20-point advantage! Alternatively, this could be a racial trait genetically engineered into any species created by psis as servants or underlings.

### Special Enhancements

**Psychic:** In addition to your physical "tells," you project your thoughts uncontrollably. Your resistance rolls against spells or abilities that read your thoughts or emotions are at -8. Moreover, if you are experiencing a high level of emotion or stress, you must make a Will roll (14 or higher always fails) to avoid projecting your thoughts and feelings so loudly that they're picked up automatically by all nearby mind readers! Assume that any telepath can "hear" such thoughts within skill×3 yards, or (IQ + Talent)×3 yards if not using psionic skills. You may not learn the Mental Strength or Mind Block skills, nor have the Mind Shield advantage. +100%.

**Psychic Only:** As for Psychic, but you only project your thoughts; your body language is no easier to read than a normal person's. +0%.

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*In the eighties, I was trained at Fort Bragg in a secret initiative code-named Project Jedi. The objective of the project was to create Super Soldiers.*

*– Lyn Cassady,  
The Men Who Stare at Goats*

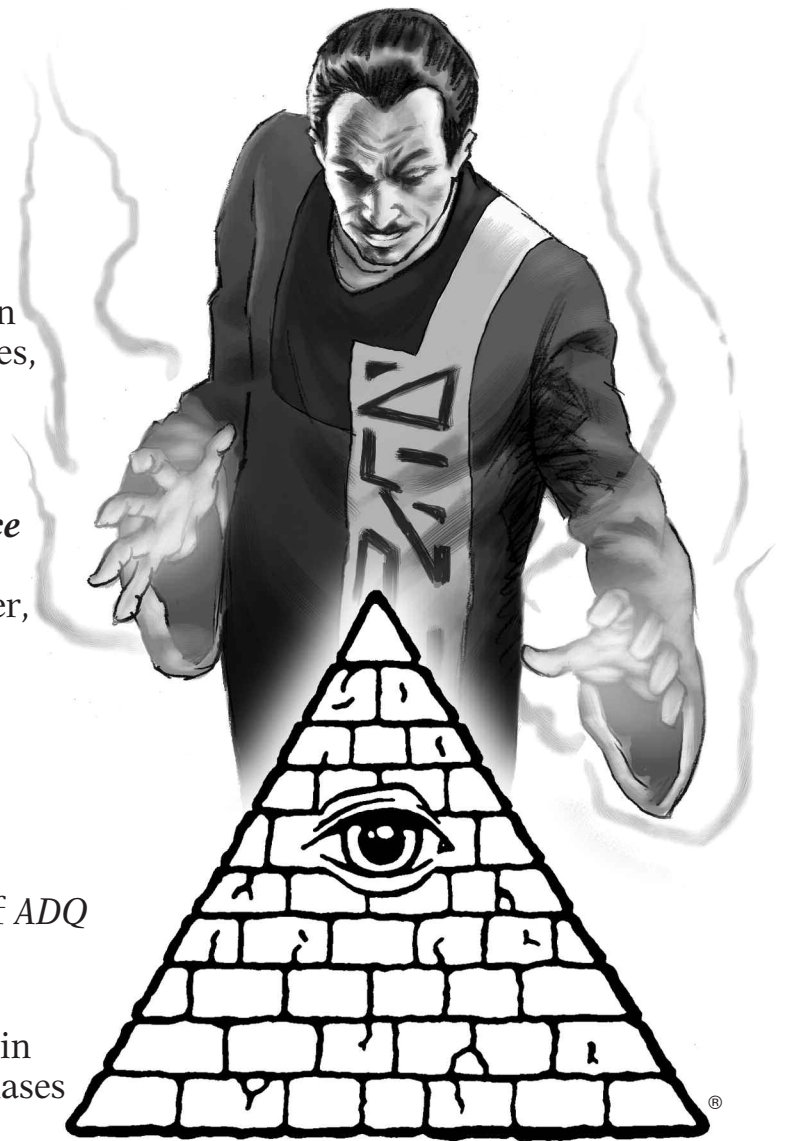


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