

Intuition: When Is It Right to Trust Your Gut Instincts?

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When asked about the source of his genius, Albert Einstein had no doubts. “I believe in intuitions and inspirations. I sometimes feel that I am right. I do not know that I am,” he told the Saturday Evening Post in 1929. It was much better to trust those instincts and test them later than to dismiss them out of hand, he said.

The physicist was by no means alone in this philosophy. It was also, apparently, a big part of Coco Chanel’s strategy. “Fashion is in the air, born upon the wind. One intuits it,” she said.

You may recognise the sensation yourself. Whether you are looking at a new apartment, considering a possible new job or judging someone’s honesty, you may have an ineffable hunch when something is right or wrong – without being able to articulate the reasons for your judgement.

It can be tempting to view our gut instincts as a kind of mysterious ‘sixth sense’, but there is no need to appeal to the paranormal to explain intuition. In the past two decades, psychologists and neuroscientists have made enormous strides in identifying the sources of our gut instincts, and their essential role in our lives. Along the way, their research has identified the specific situations in which our intuition is likely to lead us down the right path, and the times that it leads us astray – knowledge that can help us all to make better decisions.

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