

Trust Your Gut...but Only Sometimes

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When faced with decisions, we often follow our intuition—our self-described “gut feelings”—without understanding why. Our ability to make hunch decisions varies considerably: Intuition can either be a useful ally or it can lead to costly and dangerous mistakes. A new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that the trustworthiness of our intuition is really influenced by what is happening physically in our bodies.

“We often talk about intuition coming from the body—following our gut instincts and trusting our hearts”, says Barnaby D. Dunn, of the Medical Research Council Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit in Cambridge, U.K., first author of the new paper. What isn’t certain is whether we should follow, or be suspicious of, what our bodies are telling us. And do we differ in the influence that our gut feelings have on how we make decisions?

To investigate how different bodily reactions can influence decision making, Dunn and his co-authors asked study participants to try to learn how to win at a card game they had never played before. The game was designed so that there was no obvious strategy to follow and instead players had to follow their hunches. While playing the game, each participant wore a heart rate monitor and a sensor that measured the amount of sweat on their fingertips.

Most players gradually found a way to win at the card game and they reported having relied on intuition rather than reason. Subtle changes in the players’ heart rates and sweat responses affected how quickly they learned to make the best choices during the game.

Interestingly, the quality of the advice that people’s bodies gave them varied. Some people’s gut feelings were spot on, meaning they mastered the card game quickly. Other people’s bodies told them exactly the wrong moves to make, so they learned slowly or never found a way to win.

Dunn and his co-authors found this link between gut feelings and intuitive decision making to be stronger in people who were more aware of their own heartbeat. So for some individuals being able to ‘listen to their heart’ helped them make wise choices, whereas for others it led to costly mistakes.

“What happens in our bodies really does appear to influence what goes in our minds. We should be careful about following these gut instincts, however, as sometimes they help and sometimes they hinder our decision making,” says Dunn.