Gut Almighty

by Carlin Flora



You "know" things. You don't even know how you know them. Yet you have a sense of certainty when driving down a strange street that you really must make a left turn. Or comfort a co-worker who insists she's fine. Or quit your job and move to Paris.

Intuitions, or [gut feelings](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intuition), are sudden, strong judgments whose origin we can't immediately explain. Although they seem to emerge from an obscure inner force, they actually begin with a perception of something outside—a facial expression, a tone of voice, a visual inconsistency so fleeting you're not even aware you noticed.

Think of them as rapid [cognition](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/cognition) or condensed reasoning that takes advantage of the brain's built-in shortcuts. Or think of intuition as an [unconscious](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/unconscious) associative process. Long dismissed as magical or beneath the dignity of science, intuition turns out to muster some fancy and fast mental operations. The best explanation psychologists now offer is that intuition is a mental matching game. The [brain](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/neuroscience) takes in a situation, does a very quick search of its files, and then finds its best analogue among the stored sprawl of [memories](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/memory) and knowledge. Based on that analogy, you ascribe meaning to the situation in front of you. A doctor might simply glance at a pallid young woman complaining of fatigue and shortness of breath and immediately intuit she suffers from anemia.

The gut itself literally feeds gut feelings; think of butterflies in the stomach when a decision is pending. The gut has millions of nerve cells and, through them, a "mind of its own," says Michael Gershon, author of *The Second Brain* and a professor at Columbia University. Still, gut feelings do not originate there, but in signals from the brain.

That visceral punch in the paunch is testament that emotions are an intrinsic part of all gut feelings. "I don't think that emotion and intuition can be separated," says cognitive scientist Alexandre Linhares at the Brazilian School of Business and Public Administration. Emotion guides how we learn from experience; if you witness something while your adrenaline is pumping, for instance, it will be remembered very vividly.

Experience is encoded in our brains as a web of fact and feeling. When a new experience calls up a similar pattern, it doesn't unleash just stored knowledge but also an emotional state of mind and a predisposition to respond in a certain way. Imagine meeting a date who reminds you of loved ones and also of the emotions you've felt toward those people. Suddenly you begin to fall for him or her. "Intuition," says Linhares, "can be described as 'almost immediate situation understanding' as opposed to 'immediate knowledge.' [Understanding](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) is filled with emotion. We don't obtain knowledge of love, danger, or joy; we feel them in a meaningful way."

Encased in certainty, intuitions compel us to act in specific ways, and those who lack intuition are essentially cognitively paralyzed. Psychologist Antoine Bechara at the University of Southern California studied brain-damaged patients who could not form emotional intuitions when making a decision. They were left to decide purely via deliberate reasoning. "They ended up doing such a complicated analysis, factoring everything in, that it could take them hours to decide between two kinds of cereal," he says.

While endless reasoning in the absence of guiding intuitions is unproductive, some people, including President Bush, champion the other extreme—"going with the gut" at all times. Intuition, however, is best used as the first step in solving a problem or deciding what to do. The more experience you have in a particular domain, the more reliable your intuitions, because they arise out of the richest array of collected patterns of experience. But even in your area of expertise, it's wisest to test out your hunches—you could easily have latched on to the wrong detail and pulled up the wrong web of associations in your brain.

When researcher Douglas Hofstadter is starting a knotty math problem, for instance, he begins with a hunch. Then he hunkers down and calculates. After two weeks, perhaps he'll see a roadblock and give up. Another hunch pushes him to a new tack, and perhaps it is the right one.

It's time to declare an end to the battle between gut and mind—and to the belief that intuitions are parapsychological fluff. Better to explore how the internalized experiences from which gut feelings arise best interact with the deliberate calculations of the conscious mind.

**Going with your Gut can be a Winning Strategy for Trivia Games and Tests**

You've memorized the almanac and you're ready to take down your Trivial Pursuit opponents. Well, don't get too cocky—sometimes knowing less about a question helps you pick the correct answer. Intuition does the guesswork. Case in point: A kid is asked whether Spain or Portugal has a bigger population. He guesses Spain, simply because he's never even heard of Portugal. And he is right; there is a reason he isn't yet aware of Spain's less powerful and less populous neighbor. There is [wisdom](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/wisdom) in his lack of knowledge, says Gerd Gigerenzer of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin and author of *Gut Feelings*.

A University of London [team](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) found that people who went with their initial response on a test of visual perception (questions included picking out an anomaly in a pattern of symbols) did better than those who were given more time to ponder. Whereas the subconscious brain recognized a rotated version of the same symbol as different, the conscious brain reasoned that "an apple is still an apple whether rotated or not," the researchers concluded. When the subjects had time to engage their higher-level functions instead of relying on their intuitive responses, they were more likely to be wrong.

Jody Steinglass, founder of Empire [Education](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/education), a private New York City-based tutoring company, says that the trick to preparing for standardized tests such as the SAT is to hone intuition by identifying cues—say, certain words—that let you know which category a question belongs to (quadratic equation), which in turn tells you how to solve it. "Right before test time, we go through drills where I will give students a list of questions. I don't have them actually solve them but just quickly tell me how they would solve each one. This way they are trained to make good snap judgments and then to confidently trust those judgments."

**Great Liar-detectors Build on a Big Rolodex**

Many of us are sure we could never be deceived, and yet our gut instincts about people's veracity are usually off. "We don't pay enough attention to all the channels of communication, and we believe what we want to believe," says Maureen O'Sullivan, professor of psychology at the University of San Francisco. There are no set rules to follow in order to improve your fib-spotting—liars do not necessarily avoid eye contact, for example. But you can ask yourself questions, such as whether the person you are sizing up is deviating from his or her typical repertoire of behaviors. If your daughter is using strange gestures and an odd tone of voice, she may indeed be hiding something.

There is, however, a tiny elite whose [deception](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/deception) detection could be considered intuitive. O'Sullivan has spent years identifying and studying "truth wizards," people with a way-above-average ability to detect lies. Interestingly, they have various modes of arriving at their spot-on intuitions. Some are very empathetic and sort of morph into the person they are judging. "As they assume the subtle postures and expressions of the other person, they seem to be putting themselves into their skin, or into their emotional reality," she says. Others coolly notice subtle nonverbal cues and voice tones and put all of those together in a meaningful way. And until directly questioned, most are unaware of what they are doing.

O'Sullivan compares the truth wizards to Agatha Christie's fictional Miss Marple, who accurately judges people by matching them against a Rolodex of [personality](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality) types in her head. Unsurprisingly, astute judges of character are people who have an intense interest in people and a broad range of experience under their belts. "They may be a corporate lawyer who also worked in a coal mine at one point," she says.

Though you may not reach wizard status, anyone can improve general interpersonal intuition. Simply put, if you are highly motivated to understand people, your intuitions about them will be better. Take Douglas Hofstadter, professor of cognitive science and computer science at Indiana University, who has spent his life trying, he says. After all, he creates models of the human mind. "I'm deeply curious about what makes people do certain things. I am somebody who spends a great deal of time trying to understand what the real reasons for their behavior are."

Even so, Hofstadter emphasizes the importance of not prematurely closing your mind when it comes to intuitions about people and their motivations. "You have to test these cautiously. When you have confirmation—then you can make the daring leap," he says, whether it's telling your friend that you suspect she's getting divorced for the wrong reason or confronting your boyfriend about what you think are fabrications.

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