

# The Science of Intuition, and How to Tune Into Your Own

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Intuition is the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning
- › It's often referred to as a "gut feeling" or a "sixth sense" that guides you to make decisions and form judgments swiftly
- › Intuition is rooted in real-world experiences and may even rely on your brain's ability to recognize patterns and draw on memories or past knowledge, although it may occur outside of your conscious awareness
- › Research backs up the benefits that intuition can have on your decisions – including in high-stress situations; the U.S. military encourages soldiers to rely on intuition in complex situations and many CEOs use it in their decision-making process
- › It's important to pay attention to how your intuition communicates with you; it could be a gut feeling or a voice in your head, for instance – recognizing how your intuition speaks to you can help you better trust and act on these insights

**Intuition is the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning. It's often referred to as a "gut feeling" or a "sixth sense" that guides you to make decisions and form judgments swiftly. Although this process may seem random, it's based on your personal accumulated experiences and knowledge that your brain processes subconsciously.**

If you learn how to embrace it, intuition can play a significant role in how you interact with and react to the world, even if you're not fully aware that it's influencing any given moment. Intuition is so powerful, in fact, that even the military is trying to tap into its seemingly extraordinary potential.

## **Why Intuition Is More Than Just 'Magical' Thinking**

While up to 70% of adults say they always trust their instincts,<sup>1</sup> there's still a widely held perception that doing so is flawed or a form of magical thinking.<sup>2</sup> However, while intuition and magical thinking both involve thinking beyond straightforward rational and analytical processes, they are fundamentally different.

Magical thinking is the belief that you can influence outcomes by doing something that has no causal connection to them. In other words, magical thinking suggests you can influence the course of events in the material world in a manner that defies the known laws of physics and biology. This type of thinking is common in early childhood and is also a feature in certain mental health disorders and superstitious beliefs.

Intuition, however, is rooted in real-world experiences and may even rely on your brain's ability to recognize patterns and draw on memories or past knowledge, although it may occur outside of your conscious awareness. There's a reason why up to 85% of CEOs say they consider intuition to be a major determining factor when making decisions<sup>3</sup> — it doesn't usually steer you wrong.

In a study by researchers with Tel Aviv University's School of Psychological Sciences, relying on intuition to make a choice between two options led to the right decision up to 90% of the time.<sup>4,5</sup>

Study participants were shown pairs of numbers rapidly on a computer screen and asked to choose with of two groups of numbers had the highest average. Two to four pairs of numbers were shown each second — far too fast to actually do the math — so participants had to rely on "intuitive arithmetic." According to a news release:<sup>6</sup>

*"The participants were able to calculate the different values accurately at exceptional speed, the researchers found. They were also able to process large amounts of data – in fact, their accuracy increased in relation to the amount of data they were presented. When shown six pairs of numbers, for example, the participants chose accurately 65% of the time. But when they were shown 24 pairs, the accuracy rate grew to about 90%."*

## **Intuition Is Ideal for Complex, High-Stakes Decisions**

Other research also backs up the benefits that intuition can have on your decisions – including in high-stress situations. A study published in the *Journal of Perianesthesia Nursing*, explored the role of worry – an intuitive sense – in the work of Dutch nurse anesthetists.<sup>7</sup> It aimed to better understand how worry arises and its importance in the unpredictable environment of anesthesia practice.

Out of 102 surveyed nurse anesthetists, nearly all (89%) reported experiencing worry in their practice, and most (92%) said they use this feeling to guide their actions during procedures. This suggests worry acts as "important feelers" in anesthesia because it prompts nurse anesthetists to think critically and make necessary adjustments to their care plans, especially when a patient's condition changes unexpectedly.

Feeling worried, and acting on it, is just one example of how intuition can be essential for making quick, informed decisions that are crucial in high-stakes medical settings. Research by Joseph Mikels, professor of psychology at DePaul University, found that for complex decisions, concentrating on feelings rather than on meticulous details led to better outcomes, both objectively and subjectively.<sup>8</sup>

However, if participants spent time deliberating after initially focusing on their feelings, the quality of their decisions tended to decrease. These results indicate that for complex decisions, relying on emotional or gut feelings (affective strategies) can sometimes lead to better choices than a more detailed, deliberate approach (deliberative strategies).

This challenges the conventional view that careful deliberation is always the most reliable method for making sound decisions. TIME reported:<sup>9</sup>

*"His research shows that when you're making a complex decision with lots of information to weigh, you're more likely to choose the right path if you consult your intuition – your feelings – rather than debating the matter solely with reason. He found this to be especially true for older adults whose cognitive faculties might not always be as sharp as younger people's, showing that intuition is even more critical with age."*

## **Even the Military Believes in Intuition**

The U.S. Navy spent \$4 million to conduct a four-year study on sensemaking,<sup>10</sup> in which people rely on their collective experiences to construct an understanding of what's going on around them. It's particularly useful in unfamiliar or complex situations, which are common in combat and military settings.

Intuition plays a crucial role in sensemaking as it allows people to use their subconscious understanding or experience to fill in gaps in explicit knowledge. When people make sense of a situation, they often rely on intuitive judgments to quickly assess what information is relevant and what potential actions to consider.

Intuition helps in synthesizing scattered and seemingly unrelated pieces of information into a comprehensible whole, often without a deliberate effort. An announcement from the Office of Naval Research stated:<sup>11</sup>

*"Research in human pattern recognition and decision-making suggest that there is a 'sixth sense' through which humans can detect and act on unique patterns without consciously and intentionally analyzing them ... Evidence is accumulating that this capability, known as intuition or intuitive decision making, enables the rapid detection of patterns in ambiguous, uncertain and time restricted information contexts."*

The program began after many reports from marines and soldiers detailed intuition as a key part of their ability to react. Cmdr. Joseph Cohn, a program manager at the Office of Naval Research, told The New York Times, "These reports from the field often detailed a 'sixth sense' or 'Spidey sense' that alerted them to an impending attack or I.E.D. [improvised explosive device], or that allowed them to respond to a novel situation without consciously analyzing the situation."<sup>12</sup>

The U.S. Marine Corps also encourages the use of intuition in its Combat Hunter course, which aims to, in part, increase situational awareness and survivability. One of the critical components of Combat Hunter training is developing intuitive decision-making skills.

Marines are taught to trust their gut feelings and instincts, which are honed through rigorous training and scenarios that mimic real-world conditions. This intuitive process is supported by the continuous practice of observing and processing environmental and behavioral cues subconsciously. A Combat Hunter overview explains:<sup>13</sup>

*"Combat Tracker must never ignore what is called the sixth sense or intuition. The sixth sense is subtle, subconscious inputs that have not been processed into conscious, recognizable, and logical thoughts by the brain yet. In the absence of recognizable facts, a combat tracker may have to rely upon his sixth sense."*

## **How to Develop Your Intuition**

While the benefits of honed intuition on a battlefield are obvious, a finely tuned sense of intuition can also be incredibly useful for civilian life. Business owners, students, athletes and, really, anyone, can improve their awareness of their surroundings and enhance their decision-making by cultivating their intuitive powers. And, yes, we all have them.

"Intuition is a skill I believe that can be developed. Every one of us has it to some degree, but a lot of times we ignore it, or we deny it," veteran and former Navy SEALs trainer

Mark Divine told Medium.<sup>14</sup>

It's important to pay attention to how your intuition communicates with you. For some, it might be a gut feeling; for others, it could be a voice in their head. Recognizing how your intuition speaks to you can help you better trust and act on these insights. Also take time to reflect on past decisions where you followed or didn't follow your intuition.

Consider the outcomes and how your intuitive feelings played out. You may want to keep a journal to help you notice patterns in your intuitive responses and increase your sensitivity to these feelings. In the book, "Sovereign: Reclaim your Freedom, Energy and Power in a Time of Distraction, Uncertainty and Chaos," Emma Seppälä, Ph.D., suggests several strategies to strengthen your intuition:<sup>15</sup>

- **Meditate** — By calming your mind and focusing your attention, meditation reduces the "noise" of incessant thoughts. This quieter mental state can make it easier to hear and trust your intuitive feelings, which are often subtle and may be easily overshadowed by "louder" thoughts.

Meditation also nurtures your mind's intrinsic capabilities, making it more receptive and tuned to intuitive processes. It provides a supportive environment for intuition to flourish by fostering a calm, clear and connected state of being.

- **Spend time in nature** — By reducing stress and distractions while increasing relaxation, nature helps nurture the intuitive mind, making it easier to tap into and trust your inner wisdom. "Research shows you're more likely to come up with innovative insights after spending time in nature," Seppälä says.<sup>16</sup>
- **Disconnect** — Modern life often bombards us with information and technological stimuli, leading to mental fatigue. Spending time away from these sources of overstimulation can reset your cognitive functions, making space for more profound, intuitive thoughts.

*"Make time to be off your devices and in a more relaxed state," Seppälä explains. "Although you may feel idle, your brain is actually in active*

*problem-solving mode.*"<sup>17</sup>

## **Intuition Helps You Connect With Your Deeper Consciousness**

Tuning in to your intuition is a key way to connect with your deeper consciousness. It acts as a bridge between the conscious and subconscious parts of your mind. While I often focus on diet and lifestyle strategies for physical health and longevity, a strong connection to your consciousness is also important for optimizing your health.

My upcoming book, "The Power of Choice," further explores the interconnectedness between health and spirituality. Many express a desire to improve their health and well-being but struggle to take action even when presented with clear strategies.

What typically impedes their progress is a disconnection from Spirit, their authentic Self, which would provide guidance and encouragement toward positive change – if the connection was there. To learn how to support your own connection to your consciousness, including methods for cultivating self-trust, keep an eye out for "The Power of Choice." I'll be publishing summaries of the first 10 chapters soon.

### **Sources and References**

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- <sup>1</sup> [Good News Network June 18, 2022](#)
- <sup>2, 9</sup> [TIME April 23, 2024](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [Harvard Business Review August 15, 2011](#)
- <sup>4, 6</sup> [Science Daily November 8, 2012](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [PNAS May 25, 2012](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [J Perianesth Nurs. 2024 Apr 30:S1089-9472\(24\)00011-X. doi: 10.1016/j.jopan.2024.01.004](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [Emotion. 2011 Aug;11\(4\):743-53. doi: 10.1037/a0023986](#)
- <sup>10, 14</sup> [Medium May 18, 2018](#)
- <sup>11, 12</sup> [The New York Times March 27, 2012](#)
- <sup>13</sup> [Combat Hunter, Page 46 \(Archived\)](#)
- <sup>15, 16, 17</sup> [Yale Insights April 23, 2024](#)