

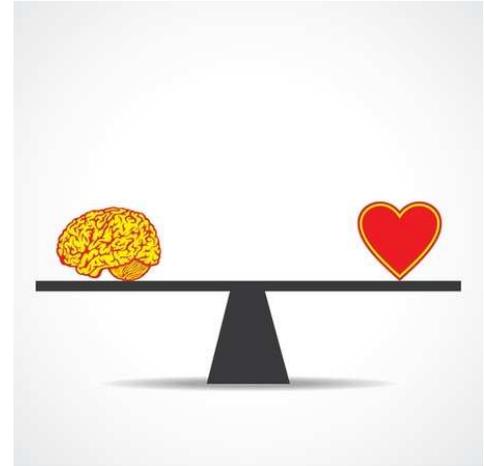


CONCEPT SHEET: Can you trust your gut instinct? Yes within reason.

How do you find the right balance between evidence and intuition to make the most consistent, timely and effective decisions? In a fast moving world full of ambiguity we often draw on intuition to help make a decision, to 'move off the spot', but can you 'trust your intuition'?

Decision making in business and life always presents the challenge of dealing with incomplete information; typically an inexact combination of limited knowledge, experience and intuition. There is a balance to be found between a complete academic analysis of facts and going with our best guess or instinct? One can lead to paralysis the other to recklessness.

This article describes what intuition is and what it isn't. The outcome is that you will understand that you can trust your intuition with the following major qualifications:



1. Intuition is a feeling (a sensation) of knowing something and does not carry the same weight as research, evidence, considered thought and logic based outcomes.
2. When good evidenceⁱ contradicts intuition – choose evidence (or at least make an honest effort to understand the evidence)
3. Use intuitive doubt (feeling dubious) as a clue to look more closely, not as an excuse to dismiss, pre-judge or remain ignorant
4. Use intuitive confidence as a motivator to move off the spot when indecisive, not as an excuse for recklessness or arrogance.
5. Be ready, open, willing and able to change your mind.

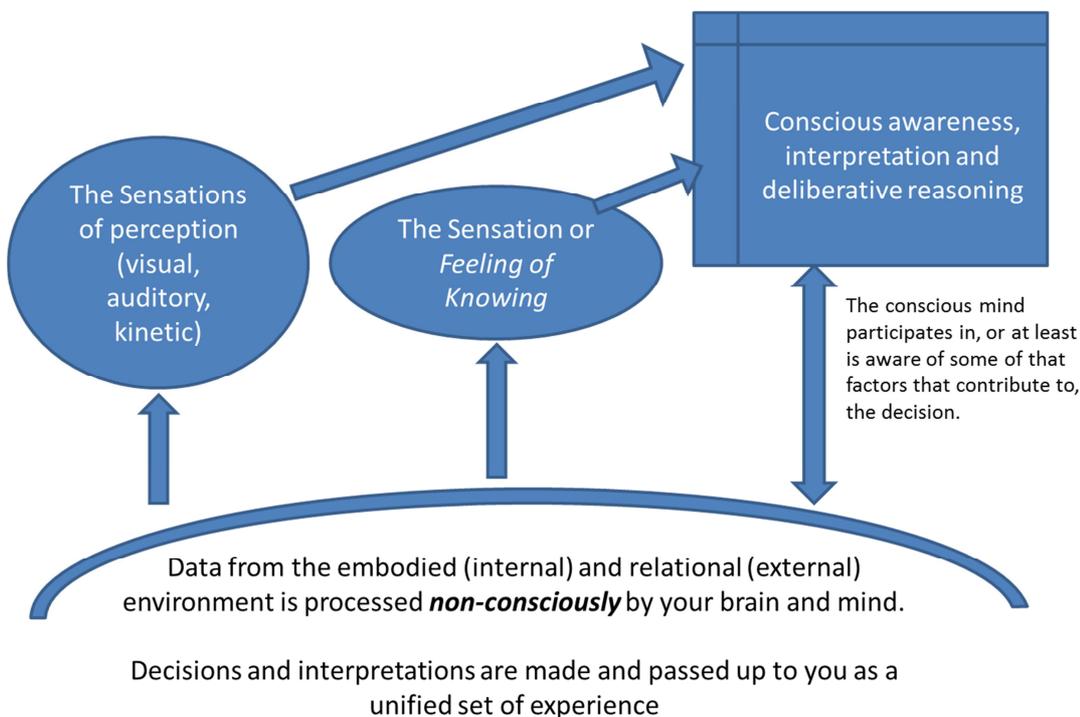
When it comes to your gut instinct: *Back yourself – just not into a corner!*

The feeling of knowing is a sensation – not the outcome of a logical thought processⁱⁱ.

If you pay attention to your thoughts while you read this you might notice that there are a number of elements to your felt experience. There is the observation (visual) of the symbols that you know to be words, language, sentences and information. There is the knowledge of how these all fit (or don't) with your existing set of knowledge and with your mind adding, editing the information to your context. In addition, if you pay close enough attention you might notice that you have to various degrees a feeling of knowing, a feeling of certainty or a feeling of doubt. This feeling gives you a sense of the truth, or otherwise, of the information.

The information and knowledge is one part, but there is also a *feeling about the knowledge*. This feeling is not a result of the logic; it is a felt sensation in response to the data.

Step one in understanding intuition is to decouple the 'feeling of knowing' something with logical semantic thought (see the diagram below).



We need to recognise that the 'feeling of knowing' is a felt mental sensation. We get this sensation accompanying all our beliefs and everything we 'feel we know' - our beliefs that are objectively true, probably true and downright false all have a feeling of correctness to us.

Some extreme analogies that help us understand this separation can be made with conditions such as Phantom Limb Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

A Phantom Limb is the strange experience often felt by amputees that their missing limb is still there, for example their missing arm feels itchy. Imagine trying to itch an arm that doesn't actually exist – it must be one of the most frustrating experiences possible. No amount of logic changes the sensation. The person clearly is aware, at a conscious level, that the limb cannot be itchy because, well, because it doesn't exist. The *feeling of knowing* that my arm is itchy is separate from the objective or consciously observable reality.

In patients suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, no amount of logic can change the *'feeling of knowing'* that the oven is still turned on, the front door is locked or that their hands are clean. They know they have locked the door but it 'feels like' they haven't. The feeling of knowing their hands are covered in germs is separate from the conscious logic that their hands are very clean after just being washed for the 17th time today.

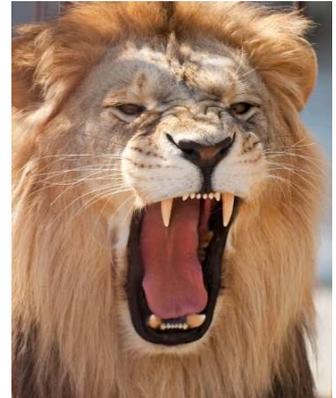
Often people with Depression look around their life at a conscious, logical level and notice they have a loving family, a decent job and that life 'ought' to be rosy – especially in comparison with so many unfortunate people in the world. They then experience guilt because they cannot reconcile this with how they actually *feel*. All of us can relate to this from time to time, whether you have been 'beyond blue' or not; the feeling (as a physical response to brain chemistry) does not match the observable facts or logic.

Don't for a moment think that you are exempt from this phenomenon. We all have a feeling of knowing that arises and is arrived at without reference to observable, objective truth. This doesn't mean that the sensation is wrong or right – in the above cases the feeling is not an accurate representation of reality, but you can have a feeling of rightness that is precisely aligned with reality – in fact they are usually at least pretty closeⁱⁱⁱ. The trouble is it that it is often very difficult to spot which is which. The material point is that it is a mental sensation (like vision, hearing, feeling queasy) and as such is open to errors.

The feeling of knowing something is important and is very valuable to us. The misfires above are offered to demonstrate the difference between the *sensation of feeling* certain and semantic knowledge, logic or evidence.

The feeling of knowing is important for decision making.

The evolutionary benefits to a feeling of knowing are clear. Imagine you are a young male lion considering a challenge to the Alfa lion. The risk is high, but so is the payoff. Unless you have a level of conviction, a sense of knowing that you can win that challenge, you will not even enter the contest. The fact is that the 'Alfa lion gets all the girls' and that to become the Alfa lion (and hence get all the girls) you have to challenge and depose him^{iv}. To make today the day, to actually take that step forward to the fight without backing away, you also need a sense or feeling of certainty/confidence that you are a chance of winning or feeling that it is important enough to challenge anyway even if the chances are slim. You've got to be in it to win it.



The same argument could be made for any form of trial and error, motivated planned actions or experimentation made by our ancient ancestors. You will not choose to 'look over that hill' or 'across that body of water', or 'dig up the root of that tree' in search of food unless you have a hunch, at some level a 'feeling of knowing' that it is worth the effort and risk. Without the feeling of knowing how would one decide on any course of action?

What about something more immediate; choosing between conflicting strategies in your business or life. Many times at Board level, in strategy meetings or in managing life, people are asked to make a choice between different approaches or ideas where there is not 'one right answer' (e.g. Do we expand into new markets or develop a new product offering to our existing market? Do we buy the property or lease? Where do we go on holiday this year?). Without a sense of knowing, a feeling of certainty or confidence we would forever be paralysed by indecision.

The feeling of knowing helps us move-off-the-spot in a fast moving world full of ambiguity.

As a world class procrastinator, one of the great lessons I learnt from Matt Church a few years ago was the maxim - 'action precedes clarity'. He means that when faced with ambiguity it is better to make a decision – move off the spot – then check-in to see if the direction you chose is correct and adjust as needed. By taking action clarity will arise. You can draw upon your gut instinct and take action – just be sure to check in for clarity and be willing to adjust. If *Action Precedes Clarity*; let intuition help you move you off the spot – just be sure you stay hungry for evidence and clarity.

When the evidence matches our feelings or beliefs all is good. Decision making is most difficult at times when there is a conflict between what you feel/believe and what logic tells you to be correct. [I explain the impact of this conflict here.](#)

When felt belief and evidence/logic don't match your mind has a problem. Your mind doesn't like ambiguity and like the best politician is very happy to change the data, the interpretation or completely ignore the findings to suit itself in that moment. This concept has [huge implications as a barrier for habit change.](#)

We have all experienced the tweaking of facts to suit pre-existing beliefs. We undermine the author, we question the veracity of the data or we change the subject. Just like politicians who call for an inquiry and then don't adopt any of its recommendations. They know that 'what the **electorate feels to be true**' is more important (to keeping their job) than 'that which is objectively true'.

We can even choose to behave in contradiction to our felt belief or hold contradictory beliefs (cognitive dissonance). For example many people still feel sure – believe - in young earth creationism, to them the word in Genesis is God’s word and literally true and that the universe is about 6,000 years old. They still drive cars powered by fossil fuel, are happy to vaccinate their kids against viruses and eat genetically modified and/or selectively bred foods. Harmless enough I guess, but I wouldn’t want to make significant life, financial and ethical decisions on the basis of a *feeling of knowing* especially where that feeling contradicts good evidence.

Ideally in our own lives we are more pragmatic, we have Boards, partners, mentors and external sounding boards. When evidence contradicts how we feel – we act on evidence. **Use your ‘feeling of knowing’ as a warning signal not as an excuse for pre-judging and remaining ignorant.**

Compare;

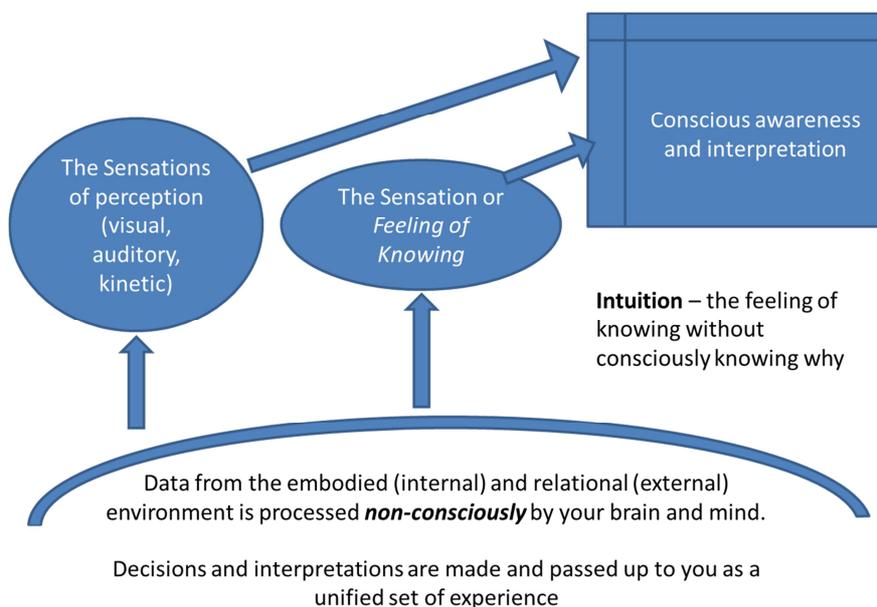
‘This evidence doesn’t feel right, something isn’t right, this doesn’t match my existing view – I need to consider it more closely before deciding.’ With....

‘This evidence doesn’t seem right, something isn’t right, this doesn’t match my worldview – therefore I am going to dismiss it without further consideration’.

Most of us at least make an attempt at objectivity through analysis of evidence and on the basis of solid evidence are prepared to change our view. What is education, growth or learning if not exactly this process? Smart leaders are open to changing their mind in spite of what they ‘felt was true’.

So what is our intuition?

Our intuition is the feeling of knowing without conscious awareness or deliberation of any part of the logic or cause.



The feeling of knowing arises from deep within your non-conscious mind. A heap of processes are being applied to incoming data, these primarily consist of looking for patterns, familiarity and 'fit' with the pre-existing model. When you read something that agrees with your beliefs and worldview you will get a strong 'feeling of knowing' or 'feeling of correctness'. This bias toward familiarity is not limited to the content of the discourse, when a person expresses a view in a prose, language and tone that you are familiar with you're more likely to get a feeling of correctness - 'familiar feels true' (DiSalvo, 2011) (Kahneman, 2012) (Mlodinow, 2012).

This is where the central idea in books such as *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking* by Malcom Gladwell provide most of their value. Your mind jumps to conclusions very quickly and presents a highly convincing feeling of knowing (Gladwell, 2005). But this doesn't mean it is correct, it is just a reflection of the degree of alignment with what your brain already believes to be true. Highly aligned feels good, feels right. Misalignment feels uncomfortable, feels wrong.

Have you ever dismissed an idea not on the basis of the idea itself but because the person expressing it was not being very eloquent? Have you ever had an immediate feeling of trust or otherwise for people within moments of your first meeting? This is your mind presenting a measure of familiarity or fit with some prior knowledge or experience.

The overreach that books like *Blink* make is that they give these intuitive impulses the same level of validity and veracity as reasoned or deliberative analysis (Burton, 2008). People seem to give gut feelings an almost mystical quality, simply because they seem to appear out of no-where. Especially when they turn out to be true – wow what a payoff for your mind when your gut instinct proves true – like a gambler you remember the wins, not the losses, and this kind of win (where feelings are front and centre) is a biggie.



When a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat, you might be impressed by their skill but you don't for a moment attribute any mystical quality to the rabbit. A physical, albeit hidden, process took place and you know that the rabbit didn't actually appear out of thin air. A thousand years ago the magician might have been burnt at the stake for being a witch, but today we know that the rabbit being in that spot at that time has a cause – a physical cause. We are impressed by the magician's skill, but do not consider the bunny itself to be anything particularly special.

Take the example of an immediate dislike of someone on first impressions. It may be that your mind correctly noticed some subtle clue of insincerity that your conscious mind was either unable or too busy to notice. Or, it could be that the person is simply unfortunate enough to look similar to an old acquaintance that had been highly damaging to you. One is a useful internal warning signal; the other is an unjustified and unfair judgment of a person on the basis of zero evidence. And both would *feel the same to you* and you would not know which was which.

If your intuition turns out to be true; that the person is not to be trusted **and** the reason your intuition was formed was from a correct reading of body language signals, then your mind gets rewarded and the *feeling of knowing* is (rightly) re-enforced. If it turns to be true for some other reason (i.e. your mind misread the signals but got lucky) then your mind gets rewarded and the *feeling of knowing* is (wrongly) re-enforced. If it turns out to be false and that the person becomes a lifelong trusted friend, you are likely to have forgotten your initial judgment or chalked it (or them) up as an exception to the rule.

Intuition is the mind pulling a rabbit out of your hat (well head). It is feeling of knowing without the knowledge of how we arrived at that sensation. All of the processing that contributed to the decision occurred non-consciously. Complete and coloured with all your personal biases and pre-existing 'knowledge'. No more and no less.

World class cricketers, pianists, lawyers, communicators, doctors – whatever - if you are highly experienced then there is very good chance that your intuition in relation to your area of expertise is going to come from a solid base. But we must still acknowledge that it is a feeling - a hunch. A hunch based on a lot of experience, but still a hunch. If I was considering how to solve a legal problem I'd sooner follow the hunch from a highly experience lawyer than from a friend in the pub (although having known lots of lawyers they're probably the same person); but it would still be important for me to know that it is a hunch – not a certain fact – and if I'm going to risk the farm this distinction matters.

Q: "Hey Mr Engineer, are these cables strong enough to hold up the bridge?"

A1: "Yep, should be I reckon."

Or

A2: "I've done the calculations according to the material specifications and had an experienced colleague double check them. The tensile strength is well established. The bridge will hold."

Which answer would you rely on?

So can you trust our intuition?

Yes – within reason.

1. Intuition is a feeling (a sensation) of knowing something and does not carry the same weight as considered thought and logical discovery.
2. When good evidence contradicts intuition – choose evidence (or at least make an honest effort to understand the evidence)
3. Use intuitive doubt (i.e. 'it feels wrong') as a clue to look more closely at the evidence and your existing beliefs - not as an excuse to dismiss, pre-judge or remain ignorant
4. Use intuitive confidence (i.e. 'it feels right') as a motivator to move off the spot when indecisive, not as an excuse for recklessness or arrogance.
5. Be ready, open, willing and able to change your mind.

Back yourself – just not into a corner.

That feels right Doesn't it?

ⁱ I appreciate the huge qualification and subjectivity of the term 'good evidence' but that is for another article on another day. We must accept the fact of subjectivity and trust that on balance we remain as open as possible.

ⁱⁱ Many of the core concepts in this article have been sourced from the excellent book *On Being Certain; Believing you are right even when you're not*. By Robert A. Burton, M.D. If you find this discussion interesting I highly recommend this book.

ⁱⁱⁱ This statement feels true to me given my experience, but it is only a feeling. I have no supporting evidence for this claim..... See how easy it is! Did you accept the statement as fact? Why? Does it 'feel true'?

^{iv} Sure all these sensations make come from various levels of hormones like testosterone, but there is also at some level an estimate of chance of success, and combined there is a feeling of knowing 'that I must take this on' or 'that I should not take this on' and this is a felt experience not a logical one.