

The Science of Intuition: How to Measure 'Hunches' and 'Gut Feelings'

By Cari Nierenberg, Live Science Contributor | May 20, 2016

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Whether you call it a "gut feeling," an "inner voice" or a "sixth sense," intuition can play a real part in people's decision making, a new study suggests.

For the first time, researchers devised a technique to measure intuition. After using this method, they found evidence that people can [use their intuition](#) to make faster, more accurate and more confident decisions, according to the findings, published online in April in the journal *Psychological Science*. The study shows that intuition does, indeed, exist and that researchers can measure it, said Joel Pearson, an associate professor of psychology at the University of New South Wales in Australia and the lead author of the study. [[Top 10 Mysteries of the Mind](#)]

Intuition is a popular topic in psychology these days, and generally refers to a brain process that gives people the ability to [make decisions without the use of analytical reasoning](#), the researchers suggest. Despite widespread acceptance of this idea by psychologists and the public, scientists have lacked a reliable test to gather objective data on intuition and even prove its existence.

Previous studies didn't actually measure intuition because researchers didn't really know how to quantify it, Pearson said. Instead, these studies relied on information from questionnaires that asked people how they were feeling while they [made decisions](#), which is more of a reflection of people's opinion of their intuition than an actual measurement of it, Pearson said.

In the new research, however, Pearson and his colleagues came up with a series of experiments to determine whether people were using their intuition to help [guide their decision making](#) or judgment. The researchers defined intuition as the influence of "nonconscious emotional information" from the body or the brain, such as an instinctual feeling or sensation.

Measuring intuition

In the experiments, the researchers showed small groups of about 20 college students black-and-white images of dots moving around on one half of a computer screen. The researchers asked the students to decide whether the dots were generally moving to the left or to the right. As the participants made this decision, on the other side of the computer screen, they saw a bright, flashing square of color.

But sometimes, the researchers embedded an image into the colorful square that was designed to trigger an [emotional response](#) from the participants. For example, each image was aimed at eliciting either a positive emotion (a puppy or a baby) or a negative emotion (a gun or a snake). However, the participants were not aware that they were being shown these emotional images because they flashed at speeds too fast to be consciously perceived.

These [subliminal images](#) were meant to simulate the type of information involved in intuition — they were brief, emotionally charged and subconsciously perceived.

The results showed that when the participants were shown the positive subliminal images, they did better on the task: They were more accurate in determining which way the dots were moving. But they also responded more quickly and reported feeling more confident in their choice. [[10 Things That Make Humans Special](#)]

The experiments also suggested that the participants became better at using their intuition over time, Pearson said. "It's all about learning to use unconscious information in your brain," he said. Just as people can become more comfortable making decisions when they [apply logic and reasoning](#), they may also become more adept at trusting their intuition when they use it more frequently over time, the study revealed.

Intuition can help people make better decisions under the right circumstances, Pearson said. The study showed that information subconsciously perceived in the brain will help with decisions if that information holds some value or extra evidence beyond what people already have in [their conscious mind](#), he said.

In the future, the researchers might be able to develop a method to train people to take advantage of their intuition and then test them to see if their intuition truly improved with more frequent use and practice, Pearson said.

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