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# How to Stop Overthinking and Start Trusting Your Gut

by Melody Wilding

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**Summary.** Intuition is frequently dismissed as mystical or unreliable — but there's a deep neurological basis for it. When you approach a decision intuitively, your brain works in tandem with your gut to quickly assess all your memories, past learnings, personal needs, and... [more](#)

Hunch, instinct, deeper knowing. There are many names for gut feelings or the ability to immediately understand something without conscious reasoning. In other words, answers and solutions come to you, but you may not be aware of exactly why or how.

In the age of big data, trusting your gut often gets a bad rap. Intuition — the term used to refer to gut feelings in research — is frequently dismissed as mystical or unreliable. While it's true that intuition can be fallible, [studies](#) show that pairing gut feelings with analytical thinking helps you make better, faster, and more accurate decisions and gives you more confidence in your choices than relying on intellect alone. This is



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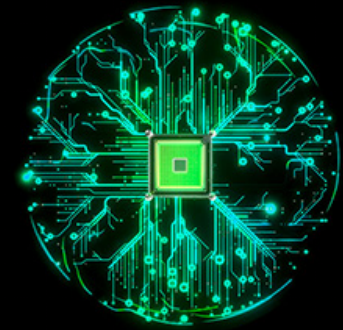


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especially true when you're overthinking or when there is no single clear-cut, "correct" option.

In fact, [surveys](#) of top executives show that a majority of leaders leverage feelings and experience when handling crises. Even the U.S. Navy [has invested](#) millions of dollars into helping sailors and Marines refine their sixth sense, precisely because intuition can supersede intellect in high-stakes situations like the battlefield.

## **The Science Behind Your Gut Feelings**

Despite popular belief, there's a deep neurological basis for intuition. Scientists call the stomach the "second brain" for a reason. There's a vast [neural network](#) of 100 million neurons lining your entire digestive tract. That's more neurons than are found in the spinal cord, which points to the gut's incredible processing abilities.

When you approach a decision intuitively, your brain works in tandem with your gut to quickly assess all your memories, past learnings, personal needs, and preferences and then makes the wisest decision given the context. In this way, intuition is a form of emotional and experiential data that leaders need to value.

Even if you're not consciously using your intuition, you still probably experience benefits from it every day. Everyone knows what it feels like to have a pit in your stomach as you weigh a decision. That's the gut talking loud and clear. If you're a manager, for example, getting a "read" on your direct reports allows you to sense when they're demotivated and to take steps to re-engage them. Similarly, doing a "gut check" on a product design can steer your creative process in the right direction.

## **How to Leverage Your Intuition in Decision-Making**

Leaders who identify as highly sensitive have stronger gut feelings than most, but have also been discouraged from using this sensory data. The trait of high sensitivity contributes to perceiving, processing, and synthesizing information more deeply, including data about others' emotional worlds. This means your intuition is more highly developed than most other people because you're constantly adding new data to your bank of knowledge about the world and yourself. The only problem is that you've probably been taught to devalue this strength in yourself.

The good news is that intuition is like a muscle — it can be strengthened with intentional practice. Here are a few ways to begin leveraging your intuition as a helpful decision-making tool in your career.

**Discern gut feeling from fear.** Fear tends to be accompanied by bodily sensations of constricting or minimizing. You may feel tense, panicky, or desperate. Fear has a pushing energy, as if you're trying to force something, or selecting an option because you want to avoid a threat, rejection, or punishment. Fear also tends to be dominated by self-critical thoughts that urges you to hide, conform, or compromise yourself.

Intuition on the other hand has pulling energy, as if your choice is moving you toward your best interest, even if that means pursuing a risk or moving more slowly than others. This is usually accompanied by feelings of excitement and anticipation or ease and contentment. Physically, gut feelings tend to cause your body to relax. With intuition, your inner voice is more grounded and wise, like a good mentor.

**Start by making minor decisions.** Choose an outfit that calls to you without weighing too many variables. Raise your hand and speak up in a meeting without censoring yourself. Taking quick, decisive actions with small consequences gets you comfortable using your intuition. By starting small, you mitigate feelings of overwhelm and can gradually

step your way up to larger, higher pressure decisions with greater self-trust. This approach is effective because it builds your distress tolerance, or your ability to emotionally regulate in the face of discomfort.

**Test drive your choices.** When you're first starting to use your intuition, decisions may not come to you quickly. Instead of overthinking, role play it. For two to three days, act as if you've chosen Option A, for example an opportunity in a new industry. Observe how you think and feel. Then, for another two to three days, try on Option B, say staying on your current career path. At the end of the experiment, take stock of your reactions. Simulating the outcome can tell you a lot about the outcome you really want and which decision would be best for you. You can also try flipping a coin and seeing how you feel about the answer. If heads means declining a big deal, do you feel joy and relief? Or worry and dread?

**Try the snap judgment test.** Relying on rapid cognition, or thin-slicing, can allow your brain to make decisions without overthinking and help strengthen your trust in your gut. Give this a try with the "snap judgment test." On a piece of paper, write a question such as, "will taking the promotion make me happy?" List yes or no below the question. Leave a pen nearby. After a few hours, come back to the paper and immediately circle your answer. It might not be an answer you like, especially if the question is a big one, but there's a good chance that you forced yourself to respond honestly.

**Fall back on your values.** Your core values represent what's most important to you. Examples include freedom, diversity, stability, family, or calmness. Let's say you're feeling agitated after a long day at work when nothing went your way. Your core values can help you pinpoint the source of your frustration and understand it more clearly. For example,

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perhaps you value honesty and what's causing tension is that you're not sharing your true feelings on an important issue. Using your values, you can check-in to figure out what feels off internally and gain perspective on the situation.

Take a moment today to reflect on what your top one to three values may be. The next time you find yourself struggling to make a decision, ask yourself, "which action or decision brings you closer to those core values?" Going within can help dissolve the internal tension that leads to mental loops.

Finally, keep in mind that intuition can't flourish in busy, stressful environments. Give your mind space to wander and make connections. Remember, while intuition is not perfect, it's also a decision-making tool you're likely underutilizing at the moment. Give these strategies a try, and you'll probably be surprised to find that your gut is a more powerful decision-making tool than you may have realized.



**Melody Wilding**, LMSW is an executive coach and author of *Trust Yourself: Stop Overthinking and Channel Your Emotions for Success at Work*. Get a free copy of Chapter One [here](#).



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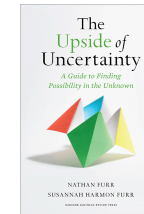


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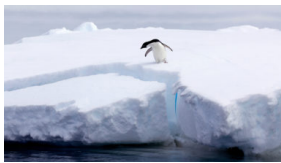


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