

Why Decision Making Fails So Often When You Don't Trust Your Gut

Despite all the advances of modern science, man's knowledge of himself hasn't come very far in the last two thousand years. While we think of modern society as being so progressive, we are still grappling with the same questions that the Greeks debated as far back at the 14th century BC, and still lack any better answers than they presented way back then.

The early Greeks turned to divine inspirations to answer the riddles and questions presented by life. They erected a shrine in the 8th century BC over the place of a divine presence that enabled a priestess to see beyond the present into the past and the future and utter often unintelligible prophecies. This shrine to Apollo, a Greek god, was called the Oracle at Delphi and lasted for nearly 1200 years. The Roman Emperor, Theodosius destroyed the temple in 390 AD to put an end to pagan practices.

Subsequent modern day findings suggest that hallucinogenic gases coming from the geological formations of that area may have contributed to these shamanistic practices. While modern-day interpretation takes some of the mystery out of the story, it certainly did not diminish the interest in searching for the answers to life's mysteries by ancients and modern day people alike.

There were two inscriptions in Greek at the entrance of the temple at Delphi. These writings outlined the most basic tenets practiced by the Oracle and continue to be psychological truths even to this day. The first was "know thyself" and the second was "nothing in excess". Balance, the second theme, is a constant in all religions and a widely accepted truth. But what about the first statement? Why was self-knowledge given such great importance by the ancient Greeks?

Perhaps they knew that self-knowledge is a pre-condition to making decisions, standing up for yourself, being independent, and fighting your fears. This knowledge is nothing new.

Why You Should Learn To Trust Your Gut

Read the following quotes from ancient philosophers to famous poets, writers and psychologists to see the importance given to self-knowledge throughout the ages (see LiveWellwithSharonMartin.com).

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom”

Aristotle

“To find yourself, think for yourself”

Socrates

“To thine own self be true”

Shakespeare

“Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable.

Be honest and transparent anyway”

Mother Theresa

“No man can, for any considerable time, wear one
face to himself and another to the multitude, without
getting bewildered as to which is the true one”

Nathaniel Hawthorne

“The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are”

Carl Jung

“Be yourself – not your idea of what you think somebody
else’s idea of yourself should be”

Henry David Thoreau

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are”

E.E. Cummings

Self-knowledge & Why It's Important To Trust Your Gut

You can readily see from these quotes that self-knowledge is important to forge a self-identity and impacts how you make decisions. You can't make decisions that reflect who you are if you don't know who you are. So how does one come by this critical knowledge?

I agree with Thomas Jefferson and many other philosophers and religious clerics that this knowledge is innate. Jefferson called it natural reason. The Quaker religion refers to it as the “Light Within”. Buddha referred to innate wisdom in his writings. Christians refer to the Holy Spirit. These terms all refer to a body of knowledge within the person that can act as their guiding light.

Some have referred to this knowledge as your gut instinct. You feel something and just know it is true. Explanations are unnecessary and putting feeling into words doesn't work. There are sometimes no words needed to explain the truth.

I wish this concept were so easy to determine. The problem is that gut instinct is poisoned. There is a difference between how you feel and the truth. Sometimes, how you feel is the truth, and sometimes how you feel reflects what you have been taught. There are natural emotions that are based on natural reason and gut instinct. There are also learned emotions that represent what you have learned from your parents and reinforced by your family.

Learning to separate natural from learned emotions enables you to make decisions, be independent but remain connected in authentic, emotionally honest relationships.

Because children are born dependent on their parents for survival, they must adapt to their parent's rules to survive. When your natural reason tells you that what you have been told isn't right, you have to hide your emotions to survive. In that confusion, people learn to be afraid of their emotions and bury the truth within. They suppress the natural emotions that reflect this truth, empowering the learned emotions to become the driving force behind one's actions and decisions.

Making Bad Decisions

You are faced with decisions all the time. They can range from business deals to choices in personal relationships. If you want to remodel your kitchen, you need a contractor. You may interview several and obtain several bids. How do you make a final decision? Do you go with the lowest bid, the best reputation online, a word-of-mouth recommendation or how you feel in the presence of the person? If you don't like the one that seems the best choice, is that enough to go with someone else? How can you avoid making the wrong decision?

The same is true for the smallest of interactions in your personal relationships. If you text a friend to go out to lunch with you, and you get no response, what should you do? Obviously, you try to reach out to get an answer for their lack of response. But what do you do if their answer seems fishy? What if they say something like, "Oh yeah, I got your text but I had such a busy day". They say it with a factual tone and don't apologize or show any remorse for the failure to respond. Their reaction is sending a message, but what exactly is the message?

Do you challenge them about the lack of emotion or overlook it because you don't want to make a big deal over a small issue? Is it a big deal or are you over-reacting? You feel hurt, but can you trust that, especially if you have a history of being sensitive to rejection? How do you make the right call to ignore or address the problem?

The answer brings you full circle to what the Oracle at Delphi said: "Know thyself". People make bad decisions all the time. They do not know that it is a bad decision until the consequences are revealed over time. Nobody chooses to make a bad decision. They believe it is right at the time, and develop regret after the fact when the decision causes an outcome that they didn't expect or intend.

So how do people fool themselves into thinking they are making a good decision in the moment only to find out later that it was a bad decision? How come they didn't know it at the time? What goes on in the mind that causes the confusion?

Bad decisions are made because people misread their emotions. They lack an understanding of how emotion impacts the mind and the need to use thought to clarify competing emotions. In the case of the contractor, if something feels wrong about the person, do you trust your read? In the case of the text message that was ignored, do you trust that you aren't making a "mountain out of a molehill"?

The answer lies in your understanding of the source of your emotions. If you pick the contractor because your friend recommended him and you anticipate that your friend will be upset if you don't take their recommendation, then the decision will be based on fear, guilt and shame, and not your true gut instincts.

Suppose that all the facts lined up to support one contractor, but you just didn't like him for some reason that is hard to explain. Is that reason enough to not select him? Just because something didn't feel quite right doesn't necessarily mean that there was something truly wrong. Or does it?

I reject the idea that good decisions are made with the facts and bad decisions are made from emotion. Trusting your gut means not having to justify your feelings. If it feels wrong, there is always something wrong. You just can't explain it in the moment.

In that sense, all decisions are emotional. Emotion in decision-making does not make it irrational. Making decisions with your heart is as important as making decisions with your head. The best decisions combine heart and head. The truth is in the heart, but you need your head to understand the message from your heart and sort through the competing voices.

A clear heart is needed to make a good decision. By clear heart I mean clarity about the source of your emotions. Emotions come from one of the two selves. Natural emotions are the ones you want to listen to. Learned emotions need to be ignored.

If a person believes that there is truth in the learned emotions of fear, guilt and shame, they will be susceptible to making bad decisions to reduce the tension caused by those emotions. They never pause to access the natural emotions in their gut. They confuse a strong reaction with a true reaction.

Learned emotions are strong, but are sometimes not true because they reflect the fears that your parents imprinted on you. Especially if the parent is not emotionally honest, learned emotions contain a high level of irrational fears and are not your gut instincts talking to you.

First Reactions May Not Be True Gut Reactions

Because natural emotion is often suppressed and experienced in delay, spontaneous reactions can be mixed with learned emotions and mistaken for gut instincts. On rare occasions, the truth is so obvious to the individual that they feel compelled to follow their heart. If a person is self-aware and knows how to listen to their natural instincts, they can more readily trust their first reactions and use these reactions to make decisions.

Most of us have not achieved that level of self-awareness, and can't trust what we feel without some self-reflection. Initial reactions are important but must stand the test of time to be trusted. Once you have gone through the discernment process and reached your decision, you have done your due diligence, used your head to sort through your heart, and can trust that you are making a good decision based on all the information at your disposal at the time.

Sometimes, bad decisions are not based on a lack of emotional awareness. Some decisions that end up being wrong in hindsight were good decisions made with limited information. Sometimes circumstances change and what was the right decision in the moment proves to be wrong because new facts emerge or different situations present themselves.

These decisions are not bad. They may end up being wrong but for reasons that are outside of the person's control. Truly bad decisions are made because of a bad process that lacks emotional awareness. Some decisions are simply wrong because the information was not present to make a different decision and just part of being human.