

5 Tips To Learn How To Trust Your Gut

The idea of learning how to trust your gut is an appealing idea. It smacks of internal strength, telling right from wrong and not being unduly influenced by the opinions of others. If you can trust your gut, you can believe in your self and stand up to others who believe differently. Sounds like something you would want to be able to do.

Your gut registers the most basic of emotional responses to people and the world around you. It is a pre-verbal response that occurs before you can find words to describe it. These emotional reactions are powerful, significant and confusing at the same time.

Are your emotions a gift or a curse? The answer depends on whom you ask. Here are the most popular quotes from the website GoodReads that gives you some indication of how people view emotion:

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”

–Helen Keller

“I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.”

-Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

“One thing you can’t hide – is when you’re crippled inside.”

-John Lennon

“The emotion that can break your heart is sometimes the very one that heals it...”

-Nicholas Sparks, At First Sight

“Your emotions are the slaves to your thoughts, and you are the slave to your emotions.”

-Elizabeth Gilbert, Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search For Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia

Here are five tips to learn how to trust your gut by managing your emotions:

Tip#1: Your whole body is your gut

Reading your emotions is difficult because human beings do not have a specific organ of feeling. Emotion is triggered in the brain in an area called the amygdala. This area is wired to the frontal cortex where thinking occurs, linking thinking with feeling. It is also wired to the endocrine glands like the thyroid. These glands secrete hormones like adrenaline that affect the entire body. As a result, the whole human body becomes the organ of feeling. Literally, your body is your gut.

While the whole body is involved, people typically refer to four areas as the specific organs of feeling: the stomach, the heart, the muscles, and the skin. The stomach and the heart are the two primary areas where emotion is felt. Sadness is described as a “heavy heart.” A joke is “light-hearted.” Similarly, you feel an emotion “in the pit of your stomach” or you may feel “punched in the gut”. Your emotions can make you “sick to your stomach”. Strong emotion is “gut-wrenching”.

The gut also involves your muscles and your skin. You refer to your muscles when you say, “I feel the tension in my neck (or shoulders)” or “that gives me a headache”. The skin is another organ of emotion. You use the phrase, “makes my skin crawl” to describe a reaction created by emotion.

Tip#2: Know what your gut is telling you

Knowing what you are feeling is a practiced art. The first step is to know how to read the impact of emotion on your body. It is a trial and error learning. You must recognize the signs that you

are experiencing some emotion – it could be an increase in your heartbeat, changes in your breathing, shifts in your posture, feelings in your stomach, etc.

From experience, you can tell the difference in the body's response to different emotions. Sadness feels different than anger. Joy is different than fear. Guilt feels much like shame, but there is a difference in depth and degree of reaction. Reading emotion takes work and practice.

It is helpful to realize that emotions come from two different sources. One source is your natural reactions to present events. Your feelings tell you that something important is happening. They are also enabling you to telegraph your reactions to other human beings. Feelings are contagious because they are sent and read by other people as well as yourself. They are a powerful transmitter of who you are and happen faster than you can form words to describe an experience.

The second source of emotion comes from memories stored in your brain. Your memory contains both images and feelings of significant events. You don't just remember events. You remember the emotions related to those events. You tag your events with emotion based on their significance. Events in the present trigger memories of past events and you experience the emotions of the past mixed within the emotions of the present.

Tip#3: Separating natural and learned emotions

Separating past from present reactions is important to understanding the information coming to you through your emotions. Your gut registers both natural emotions and learned emotions. The phrase "trust your gut" now has a new twist. You feel both learned and natural emotions, but they don't come with a tag telling one from the other. In fact, it is easy to confuse natural emotions with learned emotions simply because you feel both in your gut, and can easily confuse one with the other.

You can learn to tell the difference. Spontaneous reactions to present events are natural. They involve natural reason and trigger emotions like mad, sad, happy, etc. They are natural emotions and represent unfiltered reactions to present circumstances. You don't have time to screen these reactions. They occur faster than you can think and are giving you important information.

Learned emotions are different. Their presence is preceded by fear. The fear acts like a signal or warning sign that your natural reactions are pushing you in a direction that will violate the rules you learned from your family experience. Your parents gave you a role or script to follow and your learned emotions threaten to overwhelm you if you don't heed their warning.

However, your natural reaction is pulling you down a different path. You now may feel split in two, not knowing which road to take and full of fear. Fear typically opens the door to the rush of guilt/shame that is relieved by staying true to your role. You do as your parents say, rather than follow your own natural reason.

Tip#4: Natural emotion is quiet and learned emotion is loud

It is very confusing and even frightening at times when you feel split in two and unsure of what to do. Your gut seems to be telling you to do two entirely different things. To make matters even more confusing, the learned emotions play loudest in your mind. The size of the reaction is based on the years of experiences being told what to do by your parents and reinforced by the threat of losing their approval. Acceptance is hard to give up, especially when young and dependent upon your family for survival.

In contrast, natural emotions make sense and don't need to be loud to be right. They represent the truth within you, a quiet belief that plays softly in the mind. They result from listening to your natural reason. They are compelling and impossible to ignore. They just won't go away. They stand the test of time and call to you for recognition. They are the truth that gnaws at you when you ignore them. They are the real you coming to the surface.

As strong as they are, they can easily be overrun by the learned emotions. They may even be hard to find, lost in the din of your learned reactions. You are taught that the truth according to your parents is more important than the truth inside of you. You are taught that all authority figures know more than you. You are considered a renegade, a troublemaker, a rebel, or a disobedient child for standing up for yourself. You are taught that you should honor your parents, and questioning them is back talk and disrespectful.

You must teach yourself to stand up for yourself by finding and listening to your natural emotions. Be prepared; the world may not be ready to listen to the message you want to send. The world may fight back hard.

Tip#5: Being in the moment

I don't believe in this concept, and it only adds more confusion to trying to learn to trust yourself and read your gut. New Age philosophers often use this phrase to define a goal for healthy people to achieve. It is thought that being in the moment enables a person to calm their fears, stop trying to predict the future, and focus on only present reactions.

I don't think you are biologically wired to enable this to happen. The mind is always running, reacting to thoughts, feelings and events. It is important to sort through all the information in your head to find how you truly feel. The problem is that emotion is typically experienced in delay. You may get a sense of how you feel in a given moment, but you need time to let the reaction become unfiltered. Natural reactions need to stand the test of time. The natural emotions take time to reveal themselves. They are often hidden for a period of time and leak out slowly behind the noise of the learned emotions.

In summary...

The idea of trusting your gut sounds simple, but it is not. People often misread their emotions and often can't tell what they are feeling. There is confusion between learned emotion and natural emotion. One comes from experiences in the family and is trained in you. The other occurs naturally in response to natural reason. One comes from within and one comes from without, yet both are experienced internally as if they both originate from within.

Confusing matters even further, emotions are experienced in delay. Understanding the delayed response to your emotions is critical to reading your gut. If you expect yourself to be in the moment to read your gut, you may misread how you truly feel. If you put pressure on yourself to make decisions quickly in the moment, the chances are you will probably be driven by learned emotion and staying true to how you were raised. Real, gut reactions take time to develop fully. You need a period of time to sort through the competing reactions. Discernment takes time, but natural reactions must be given time to be discovered and trusted.