

# When it comes to empathy, don't always trust your gut

July 22, 2016

Is empathy the result of gut intuition or careful reasoning? Research published by the American Psychological Association suggests that, contrary to popular belief, the latter may be more the case.



"Cultivating successful personal and professional relationships requires the ability to accurately infer the feelings of others - that is, to be empathically accurate. Some are better at this than others, a difference that may be explained in part by mode of thought," said Jennifer Lerner, PhD, of Harvard University, a co-author of the study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. "Until now, however, little was known about which mode of thought, intuitive versus systematic, offers better accuracy in perceiving another's feelings."

Individuals process information and make decisions in different ways, according to Lerner. Some choose to follow their instincts and go with what feels right to them (i.e., intuitive) while others plan carefully and analyze the information available to them before deciding (i.e., systematic).

Lerner and her co-author, Christine Ma-Kellams, PhD, of the University of La Verne, conducted four studies, involving over 900 participants, to examine the relationship between the two modes of thought and empathetic accuracy. The first determined that most people believe that intuition is a better guide than systematic thinking to accurately infer another's thoughts and feelings. The other three studies found that the opposite is true.

"Importantly, three out of the four studies presented here relied on actual professionals and managers. This sample represents a highly relevant group for which to test empathic accuracy, given the importance of empathic accuracy for a host of workplace outcomes, including negotiations, worker satisfaction and workplace performance," said Ma-Kellams.

These findings are important because they show that commonly held assumptions about what makes someone a good emotional mind reader may be wrong, said Lerner. "The many settings in which the value of intuition is extolled—for example a job interview—may need to be reassessed with a more nuanced perspective."

➕ **Explore further: People who rely on their intuition are, at times, less likely to cheat**



Featured Last comments Popular

- Gut microbes may influence multiple sclerosis progression 21 hours ago 0
- Omega 3 helps the gut stay healthy, study finds Sep 11, 2017 0
- Australian researchers say they can stop melanoma spreading Sep 11, 2017 0
- Long sitting periods may be just as harmful as daily total 19 hours ago 0
- Eleven new studies suggest 'power poses' don't work Sep 11, 2017 4

more »

Medical Xpress on facebook

MedicalXp...

Follow

**More information:** Christine Ma-Kellams et al. Trust Your Gut or Think Carefully? Examining Whether an Intuitive, Versus a Systematic, Mode of Thought Produces Greater Empathic Accuracy, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2016). DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.2782596

**Journal reference:** [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#)

**Provided by:** [American Psychological Association](#)

10 shares

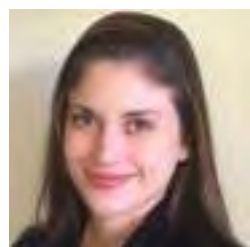
feedback to editors

G+ Tweet submit reddit Favorites Email Print PDF



Related Stories

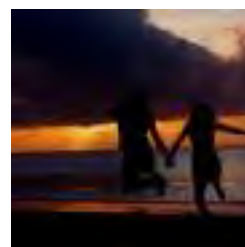
Recommended for you



**People who rely on their intuition are, at times, less likely to cheat**

November 24, 2015

In psychological studies, intuition, or "gut instinct," is defined as the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning. Now, a University of Missouri graduate student has determined ...



**Relationship science: How can couples keep moving forward**

September 11, 2017

For some couples in romantic relationships, just staying together is good enough. But others want to see their relationship move forward—to get better and better—and are willing to put in the effort to get there.



**'Thinking and feeling'**

March 7, 2016

So you had a terrible day at work. Or the bills are piling up and cash is in short supply. Impending visit from the in-laws, perhaps?



**Scientist finds secret to thriving**

September 8, 2017

What it takes to thrive, rather than merely survive, could be as simple as feeling good about life and yourself and being good at something, according to new research.



**Study suggests fresh approach to autism research**

January 18, 2016



**Emoji fans take heart: Scientists pinpoint 27 states of emotion**

0 comments



Commenting is closed for this article.