

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, Dec 9, 2015: “Intuition isn’t always right”
Casper Star Tribune, Dec. 12: “Intuition is superfast thinking—with a catch”

People tend to believe that intuition is something ephemeral and mysterious: you either have it or you don't. It turns out, however, that intuition is superfast thinking that relies on experience, acquired skills, and familiar emotions. There's a catch, however. While memory holds a vast repertoire of skills, which can produce adequate responses to challenges as they arise, faulty experiences or preconceived notions lead to wrongful decisions.

Valid intuitions develop when we are an expert in something and recognize familiar elements in a new situation. This permits us to act quickly and appropriately. To deal efficiently with vast amounts of information, skilled performance helps us arrive at decisions.

On the other hand, by falling back on conclusions drawn from faulty experience, intuitive or “fast” thinking dovetails into stereotypes and clichés. Experience can be a fallible guide.

Our brain manages a “division of labor” between fast thinking and slow thinking. In contrast to thinking that focuses intensely on a task, intuitive judgments use rules-of-thumb and other shortcuts to attain cognitive ease. This is where we may be led astray.

The following example comes from Daniel Kahneman's “Thinking, Fast and Slow.”

An individual has been described by a neighbor as follows: “Steve is very shy and withdrawn, invariably helpful but with little interest in people or in the world of reality. A meek and tidy soul, he has a need for order and structure, and a passion for detail.”

Is Steve more likely to be a librarian or a farmer, the author asks—and shows that, when we conclude that Steve must be a librarian, we use “occupational stereotypes.” Considering the fact that there are twenty times more male farmers than male librarians, it's likely that we will find our “meek and tidy soul” on a tractor rather than behind a librarian's desk.

It isn't just shortcut-intuitions that lead to errors in choice or judgment. We all know that, when we are tired and hungry, we are apt to be cross and uncooperative. This “depletion effect” can have far-reaching results.

Mr. Kahneman cites a study from Israel of eight parole judges who were “unwitting participants.” All day long the judges review parole applications, spending about six minutes evaluating each case. The default decision is denial of parole; only about 35% of requests are approved. When the exact time of each decision was recorded, it was found that 65 percent of the requests were granted shortly after the judges' meal breaks. When tired and hungry, they fell back on the default decision of denying parole. “Both fatigue and hunger probably play a role,” the study concluded—which is no consolation to the applicants whose petitions were denied.

The problem with fast thinking is, it happens lightning-quick, leaving no time to reconsider a reaction to an event or person. Unless we recognize fast thinking as we engage in it, we are unlikely to evaluate whether, e.g., a reaction is based on a stereotype. The author and his associates have undertaken many studies that show human reluctance to change preconceived notions, which rendered him pessimistic.

Another writer argues, however, that we can train ourselves to acquire the skill of empathy, which will keep us from thinking in stereotypes. Roman Krznaric's “Empathy: Why it Matters, and How to Get It” highlights the “Six Habits of Highly Empathetic People.” These habits are something each of us can cultivate. Just as regular singing improves vocal renditions, so the practice of empathy makes people more responsive to other living beings.

The capacity to empathize is one of the “hidden talents” possessed by almost every human being, this author asserts. Yes, there are psychopaths out there. Also, people with autism disorders like Asperger’s have a hard time understanding the experiences and emotions of others. But they account for no more than two percent of the population; the other 98 percent is “wired for social connection.”

Empathy is the “constant awareness” that your concerns are not everyone else’s concerns, your needs not everyone else’s needs. You imagine putting yourself in the place of someone else, with joys and afflictions that differ from your own.

We need to cultivate empathy, not only as a relationship tool but also as a collective force. Once we’ve experienced empathetic action that healed a broken relationship or deepened a friendship, we are moved to work together to tackle crises like political and ethnic violence and religious intolerance. Poverty and hunger is the fate of its victims—a timely example is what we see in the faces of Syrian refugees and their children. Only with the power of empathy are we able to address the suffering of our fellow humans.

Whenever we become aware that some of our thinking consists of preconceived notions that are erroneous or outdated, we can choose to revise ourselves.