

INSTINCTS: Motorcycle Safety and the Caveman Brain

An excerpt from the forthcoming book: WHY ME? A Practical Guide For Recognizing And Protecting Yourself And Your Children From Sexual Predators

by: Chester Brost

Jolly Vounders' heart pounded out a staccato rhythm as he dragged himself to the curb bleeding from his head, hands and knees. As he sat there waiting for the police, he couldn't stop beating himself up for not listening to his "gut". Shaking his head back and forth, he repeated one sentence: "I knew he was going to pull out in front of me, I just knew it." Tom Peterson, a medical student at U.I.C., sits on a gurney, holding an ice bag to his head, trying to figure out why he rode his motorcycle through that intersection when his instincts warned him that that car wasn't going to stop. 29 year old Juliet Lauderdale sits stunned and in shock, her motorcycle lying on its side, wondering why she didn't listen to her "little voice" when it told her that the driver of that car didn't see her.

We have all experienced them: a little voice, an instinct even a gut feeling or two, but however you choose to label those reactions to danger, one thing is certain; if you choose to ignore them, it can cost you your life.

In some of the cases I've read, motorcycle accident victims made references to feelings they experienced prior to their crash. In some instances, these feelings of danger appeared well in advance to the accident and reflect feelings of uneasiness about their surroundings prior to any indication that they were in danger or about to become involved in an accident. However, in these cases, the victims adaptive unconscious, the producer of these "gut feelings" or anxieties, was analyzed, and through a rationalization process a reason for those feeling was dredged up, that was assumed by the victim to accurately reflect their meaning, causing them to put aside their fears and ignore their initial emotional response. In this article I hope to explain the sources of these emotional responses and gut feelings, to give you an added edge to safer riding seasons, for years to come.

Research that is being conducted at the National Institute of Health is showing the importance of these unconscious mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness, but, that influence judgments, feelings, or behavior. However, this is not the unconsciousness of repressed memories. Instead, this unconscious processes data, sets goals, formulates stereo types, judges people and detects danger, all outside our conscious awareness. In fact, there is a growing consensus that the unconscious is very smart, with cognitive capacities that rival, sometimes even surpass that of conscious thought.

This sophisticated system operates under the radar of consciousness for the sake of efficiency. We need to process so much information to survive, that some of it has to occur unconsciously. Even while our mind is otherwise engaged, we constantly process unconscious calculations, judgments, and feelings. The adaptive unconscious also sizes up peoples motives, character and intent, judgments crucial to reach quickly in any number of given situations.

As we evolved as a species, humans survived by hunting and foraging, existing nomadically in small groups (hmm, sound familiar?), seeking mates, finding shelter to

avoid the elements and avoiding injury. Those are the undertakings our gray matter evolved to perform. In the formative dawn of human history, someone who underestimated a risk may have become a quick meal for a wild carnivore. And as such, the human brain has evolved into a precision instrument when it comes to solving ancient problems like recognizing danger or generating emotional responses with lightning speed.

Taking an even deeper scientific journey into the human brain, the tour begins with the amygdala (a-mig-duh-luh), in the depths of the lower frontal region of your brain. (Both, the left and the right side of your brain have one.) A key part of the brains early warning system, the almond-shaped amygdala supplies a plethora of ultra-responsive emotions like fear and anger. If you were to see an object hurtling toward your head, for example, you wouldn't ponder about whether it were a cotton ball or a rock, you would automatically raise the hand to protect the eyes and face. That's the amygdala kicking in.

Intense noises or unfamiliar visions, such as train whistles or an assuming vehicle invading your lane, can trigger the amygdala to respond. Before you can discern what these vivid sights and sounds mean, your heart and respiratory rates increase and you begin to sweat. This primal part of your brain is bracing you for a "fight or flight" response. It is this physical threat of danger that sets off the amygdala (though danger is not its only activator).

Ironically, however, this very same memory storage compartment of our brain helps to make us more rational, through the examination of ones own thoughts and feelings. If nothing could counter the fight or flight function of the amygdala, we may never have a moments peace. Fortunately, the pre-frontal cortex, a region of the brain behind the forehead, allows us to share sets of events in the form of memories to draw general conclusions from particular data, to forecast the consequences of our actions and to compare current and past experiences, thus, helping us to reach more balanced judgments.

It is this very introspection about the unconscious that may mislead people about how they feel, causing them to cast aside their "gut feelings". We don't have meaningful access to how we process sights or access memories, or perform many other mental functions, so, too, are we stopped short at the door to the unconscious. Faced with this great obstacle, when we try to introspect about our unconscious feelings, we simply wing it; we come up with whatever is on our conscious minds.

In analyzing why we unconsciously fear a situation, we might hit upon a "reason" because it's the first thing we think about (the car is moving to fast to stop), or because it's unacceptable behavior (the driver isn't paying attention). Once these reasons are dredged up, we assume that they accurately reflect our unconscious feelings (our activated amygdala). However, this about the time the pre-frontal cortex kicks in, comparing your historical data to try and reach a more balanced judgment about the, now conscious, feelings you have dredged up. These processes occur in fractions of a second, and it is this very introspection that can cause you to change those conscious feelings (he sees that stop sign); (I'm sure he sees me in his mirror), and it is this very introspection when truly confronted by an idiot, that can cost you

your life! If you'll recall Tom Peterson's confounded ruminations regarding his failure to listen to his instincts. He "felt" that the car wasn't going to stop, however, after the introspection and comparing his historical event data, he reached a more balanced judgment and proceeded through the green light.

Since it is impossible to change how your brain works, you must learn to make the most of its strengths and weaknesses alike. Whenever possible, you should react to your initial instincts, and hopefully the knowledge gained for this article will help you to become more aware of your emotional responses, so that you may learn how to react without looking inward for answers.

By understanding that your gut feelings aren't coming from behind your belt buckle, but rather from behind your forehead, it is possible to develop response habits that are tailor made for neutralizing your brains insistence on introspection. While at the same time, optimizing its greatest asset, the amygdala. React, and ride safe.

Chuck

For more information on how your instincts can also prevent you from falling victim to predators and criminals, drop me a line at:

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