

Week 4 Answer to Question 2
Step 5.3 Ask Mark

Okay. Here comes question 2, and it goes like this:

Question 2: we so often make a decision, only to end up making the wrong one. The irony of the matter is that most often the correct choice came to mind first, and as such you just knew it. But when you start pondering about it you end up making the wrong one. Why do we doubt our instincts? Could this be because we could not learn from our own mistakes, but must from those of others? Many have lost their lives because they didn't trust their initial thoughts and instincts. Many have lost fortunes not going with their initial instinct. What is it about ourselves that make us doubt ourselves, especially so in life-threatening situations? Or is this merely like flipping a coin?

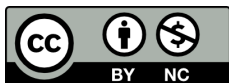
I think the main principle here is that the things that we do instinctively - and I want to first of all point out that instinctively is not quite the word I would use here, I would rather say the things that we do "automatically" - are based on long-standing experience, for the most part. In other words, we only automatize our responses when such automatization is justified. In other words I've been here before - and again and again and again and again and again - and I've honed my response so much so that I no longer need to think about it. Then it becomes an automatic response, a deeply consolidated form of response. I'm generalizing here, because there are multiple memory systems that don't all work in the same way, but overall that's correct.

So automatic responses are over-learned responses, they're responses that have, as it were, stood the test of time, they've proven their worth in multiple individual situations. Now that includes instinctual responses, in the sense that responses that have proven their worth over generations - thousands and thousands of generations - by natural selection certain response patterns have proven their worth in terms of the biological scale of values. In other words these responses so enhance our chances of surviving and reproducing that they get selected into the human genome. So in a basic sense, the same principle applies - that these instinctual responses, just like our over-learned habitual responses, are automatized because they're so reliably correct.

That begins to answer your question, you know, that it speaks to your hunch or your claim that the automatic first, you know, without thinking response is in fact one that we should rely upon, it's one that we should trust more than we do. Which begs the question that you asked: why don't we always trust the instinctual or automatized habitual response? Well, the answer is because - as they say with investment funds - the past performance doesn't always predict the future. Sometimes, although that always was the correct response in every previous situation, each new situation comes with its own variants, and this might be the time that it's not the right response. That's why we have this other aspect to our decision-making which is not automatized, which is more deliberate, what we call thinking. Thinking is interposed between stereotyped automatism and action, because sometimes you need to inhibit that stereotyped or automatic response to consider new developments. You can see why that's a very valuable nuance to the system, and it's in this way that we update automatized responses, that we reconsolidate them is the technical term that we use. Reconsolidation requires bringing an automatized response back to consciousness so that you can think about it again, and then consolidate it in a revised form.

So that's sort of the broad framework within which I would answer the question, that we should trust our instincts as it were, we should trust our hunches, our intuitions, because they're - despite the pejorative terms that are attached to things like intuitions - they really are intuitive for very good reason, it's because they've stood the test of time. But at the same time, as I'm saying, that doesn't mean that they are going to predict every single future situation correctly, and there's a degree of doubt that is required. It's interesting, when you - things that have been automatized like, for example, a tennis stroke or a golf swing or something - you know, anybody who plays these sports or plays the piano and so on, will know that you can play much better when you don't think about what you're doing. That's precisely because by thinking about what you're doing you're now, you know, throwing open the possibilities, and that deep groove that you otherwise would be in is cancelled by the bringing of the thing back into working memory and back into thinking processes.

I don't know if it's true that we always do that. I think this becomes more a matter of individual difference, so I suspect at bottom the question is about people who too many times doubt their intuitions. And also, there must be the equivalent - I think there are people who too many times trust their intuitions. What's needed is some sort of flexible balance between the two. But at least I hope that in answering the question in the way that I have - I've indicated what the basic issues are, and why intuitive responses in the most - in the majority of cases, are the ones that are more likely to lead to a successful outcome. So there you have it.



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