

# People who rely on intuition judge situations more harshly, study finds

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In psychology, intuition, or "gut instinct," is defined as the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for reasoning. A recent University of Missouri study determined that people who strongly trust their gut instincts tend to harshly condemn moral transgressions, and they do not change their point of view even after thinking about the issue. Findings show that people who strongly rely on intuition automatically condemn actions they perceive to be morally wrong, even if there is no actual harm.

"It is now widely acknowledged that intuitive processing influences moral judgment," said Sarah Ward, a doctoral candidate in social and personality psychology. "We thought people who were more likely to trust their [intuition](#) would be more likely to condemn things that are shocking, whereas people who don't rely on gut feelings would not condemn these same actions as strongly."

Ward and Laura King, a Curators Professor of Psychological Sciences at MU, had study participants read through a series of scenarios and judge whether the action was wrong, such as an individual giving a gift to a partner that had previously been purchased for an ex.

The researchers then wanted to determine if getting people to think about these actions—asking them why they thought it was morally wrong or describing their emotional response—would lead to fewer individual differences in how people responded.

"We consistently found that people who are more prone to rely on intuition condemned these actions," Ward said. "If everybody reasons about these things, then the people who had that initial gut reaction might then decide, 'Oh, this isn't so bad—it's not harmful,' and what we found is that after people deliberated, in general they did condemn these actions less, but [people](#) who strongly relied on their intuitive instincts condemned these actions more harshly than others."

The final experiment asked participants to make rapid, two-second decisions when presented with morally ambiguous scenarios.

"What we found is they still mattered," Ward said. "People who were more intuitive still condemned these morally ambiguous actions even on a two-second snap [judgment](#), which suggests this tendency to rely on intuition relates to all kinds of moral decisions, whether one judges them rapidly or thinks through the implications. This is important because this research has assumed everybody is using intuition to guide these judgments, but what we are finding is there is a lot of individual variability."

People may not realize their ideas about what is morally wrong are often guided by intuitive reactions to issues rather than more rational considerations, like whether the actions are harmful, Ward said. She added that individuals tend to think of themselves as very rational decision makers unswayed by intuition and emotion; however, [moral judgments](#) are likely to be heavily influenced by intuitive responses among those who tend to trust their intuition.

Ward and King's paper, "Individual Differences in Reliance on Intuition Predict Harsher Moral Judgments," was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

**More information:** Individual Differences in Reliance on Intuition

Predict Harsher Moral Judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. [psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fpspp0000153](https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fpspp0000153)

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