

Why dithering gets you nowhere



Top tips to improve sleep during the menopause
Here is your must-have guide to helping you relax, unwind and get a good night's sleep

Sponsored by Vichy

By Roger Highfield, Science Editor

12:01AM GMT 09 Jan 2007

Trust your gut instincts when decision-making gets tough, a study published today suggests.

The research, published in the journal *Current Biology*, shows that, in some cases, snap decisions are more reliable than endless pondering using higher-level cognitive processes.

Participants were asked to pick the odd one out on a screen covered in more than 650 identical symbols, including one rotated version of the same symbol.

They performed better when given no time to linger and were forced to rely on their subconscious.

Dr Li Zhaoping, of University College London, said: "You would expect people to make more accurate decisions when given the time to look properly.

"The conscious or top-level function of the brain, when active, vetoes our initial subconscious decision — even when it is correct — leaving us unaware or distrustful of our instincts and at an immediate disadvantage.

"Falling back on our inbuilt, involuntary subconscious processes for certain tasks is actually more effective than using our higher-level cognitive functions.

"Participants would have improved their performance if they had been able to switch off their higher-level cognition by, for example, acting quickly."

The work chimes with an earlier study showing that novice artists draw better portraits if their subject is shown upside down, so they are not distracted by whose face it is and other "higher level" information and focus on details instead.

It also backs a study of decision-making based on two categories, complex, like buying a house or car, and simple, like choosing a shampoo.

Researchers at the University of Amsterdam found that thinking hard about what car you should choose leads you to make a poor choice, certainly not the best one.

People identified the best car of four, each with 12 desirable attributes, around 25 per cent of the time, which was no better than chance.

The surprise came when the researchers distracted the participants with puzzles before asking for them to make their choices.

More than half then managed to pick the best car.

The planet's longest subterranean river



Once used as a shelter during the WWII, it can be found in Belgium's Liège province



© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2016