



# What Would You Do?

When you're faced with a drama-rama decision, don't hit your feeds. It's time to stop outsourcing advice and start tapping the most important counselor in your life: you.

*By Paula Derrow*

What do Beyoncé, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and Barb from *Stranger Things* have in common? They've all been summoned on coffee mugs, T-shirts, Pinterest boards, and European pillow shams to help guide the masses through nail-biting decisions.

Look, we get it. On the surface, "What would [insert name here] do?" is an amusing cultural trope, the stuff of memes. And yet it reflects a troubling real-life trend: our tendency to minimize our own instincts and hard-won experience in favor of what the peanut gallery thinks.

Beyond channeling cultural icons, our compulsion to check in with *everyone* is fueled by—what else?—

social media, experts say. When you can easily crowdsource 878 Facebook pals, what's the harm? But on a physiological level, being hyperconnected to our digital circles has tamped down our decision-making powers. It short-circuits our intuition, which plays a major role in our ability to move conclusively without debating a litany of what-ifs. That sets off a chain reaction: You rely on others more, which saps your confidence, leading to weaker life choices.

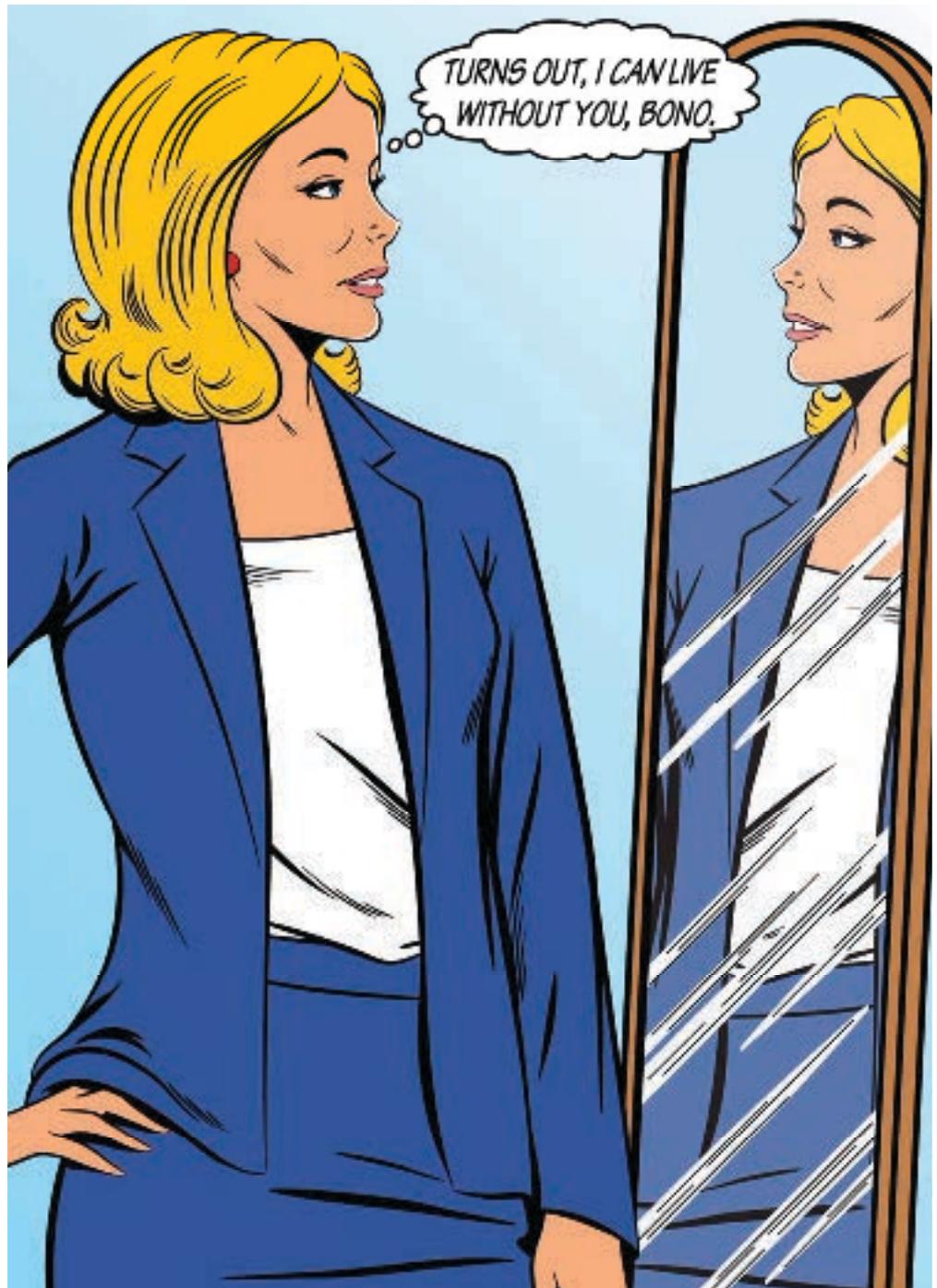
Sheesh, right? So we got experts and real women to show you how to harness your internal brain trust and instincts to help you through problems big and small. Barb and Co. would be so proud!

### LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

People were using the phrase "trust your gut" long before research revealed the stunning fact that your gastrointestinal system literally does have a "mind" of its own. It's home to hundreds of millions of nerve cells that send and receive impulses, record encounters, and respond to emotions. When neurotransmitters deliver these impulses and messages to your brain, you experience physiological reactions, like goose bumps or a heavy feeling in the pit of your stomach—a.k.a. gut feelings. Scientists have a name for these sensations—somatic markers—and they appear when we face uncertainty.

For instance, say you walk out of an interview telling yourself, "That's the perfect job for me!" But at the same time, your stomach feels knotted. Your gut-brain may be telling you that something about the job is "off," even while your rational brain is reminding you how good everything looks on paper.

Andie Diemer, 28, a freelance photo editor and producer in New York City, faced such a moment when the magazine she was working for laid off her and 50 others in a reorganization. "My brain was telling me to do the safe thing—to find another full-time job. But something in me



was saying to continue with the one freelance client I had scored and see if I could build my own business.” Whenever she thought about looking for a new job, her heart rate would soar, her stomach would twist, and her thoughts would swirl and race with anxiety. “Sometimes those kinds of symptoms make me insecure and unproductive, but when I went ahead and committed to freelancing, the feelings faded and I felt confident. I ended up with an amazing career.”

Lots of these gut signals don’t even reach conscious thought—but they influence you nonetheless. Reams of studies have documented how subconscious signals help us make better decisions. Take the sign of sweaty palms. In one study, participants in a card game chose from two different decks. It took them about 50 cards to say that one deck was more likely to lead to success than the other, but their palms were sweating in favor of the “good” deck after about 10 cards.

Sweaty palms, of course, can also be a sign of fear or anxiety. Many markers have a dual personality—butterflies can signal a crush on someone or a terror of public speaking; a prickly feeling at the back of the neck can denote excitement or be a marker of danger. Say you’re walking in a park at dusk; if you get a “raised hackles” sensation, listen to it, says David Myers, Ph.D., a professor of social psychology at Hope College. “There’s biological wisdom to this,” he explains. “As we evolved, those who could read a person quickly and accurately were more likely to survive and leave descendants.” The body, it knows.

**TAP INTO EXPERIENCE**

Intuition is powerful—but even more so when it incorporates what you’ve learned about the world (and yourself). “There’s a huge store

of information in the brain that we’re not always aware of that’s based on our life experiences,” says Joel Pearson, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. Often, what we think of as a gut feeling is actually intuition interacting with expertise—the latter of which we take for granted. “Experience is what allows everyone, from top surgeons to master chess players to mechanics, to have vital hunches and to trust them,” says Myers.

That mash-up is what’s at work when you’re facing a far-reaching decision, like whether to buy a particular apartment, take a job, or end a relationship. You’re not making your choice in a vacuum. For instance, imagine walking into an apartment you’re thinking of renting and immediately getting goose bumps (the bay windows! The light! I’d be so happy here!). The downsides: It’s on a noisy street and the rent is a bit more than you can afford. You want it, but you also sense a creeping anxiety—because deep down, you know you’re a light sleeper, not to mention your boss just said they’re not doling out raises this year. Your mind’s database and your gut are joining forces to give you the full picture.

Elisa Fernández-Arias followed both when, at 26, she left her first full-time job, as well as family and friends, to move to Paris. “I had studied abroad there when I was 20 and always imagined I’d move back someday. Meanwhile I was waking up in the morning feeling like a big part of me was barely alive,” she recalls. She took a spring break trip to Paris, ended up interviewing for and getting a low-wage job that would pay the bills, and went home to pack up. “Most of my friends thought I was crazy. My parents were angry. It was a tough transition, but in the end I found what I was looking for: myself.”

**AND JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT...**

We imagined how cultural icons (real and fictional) would answer one pertinent Q: What should my New Year’s resolution be?

**Start smoking, quit smiling, and don't let other broads get in your way.**

**WHAT WOULD DON DRAPER DO?**

**Cut ties with anyone in your life who doesn't make you feel like a million sequins.**

**Do or do not finally listen to the second Serial podcast—there is no try.**

**Be the change you wish to see...unless you want more reality dating shows in the world. We have enough of those.**

**Dwess wike mommy but no heels. I wike sneakows.**

**Reese Witherspoon**

**North West**

**Penelope Disick**

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## PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Getting in touch with—and trusting—your own perceptions is challenging since, as a culture, we lean toward the rational instead of the intuitive. But you can build that intuition muscle.

To give it a workout, first unplug from all devices and sit quietly, as if meditating. Breathe deeply and ask yourself the question you're facing. "You want to get into a neutral place emotionally and let the information come," says Judith Orloff, M.D., a Los Angeles psychiatrist and author of *The Empath's Survival Guide*, coming out in April. Say you're wondering whether the guy you've started seeing is really a match. "Notice how your energy feels when you picture him. Does it go up or down? If down, ask yourself why. Does he drain your energy in some way?" says Orloff. "Or do you feel excited and positive? That's a good sign to have that person in your life." Don't let small flaws throw you (nobody's perfect) or conscious rationales intrude (*My friends love him! He's such a nice guy... even though he's not that exciting. I don't think my parents like him.*)

Or try the post-mortem approach and pretend you've already made the decision. How does it feel? Does cutting ties with a needy friend give you a sense of relief? Are you filled with regret now that you gave your two-weeks' notice? Listen to your body as you imagine the scenario. Do your hands start sweating? Does your head ache a bit?

Another strategy, experts say: Sleep on it. Research has shown that Zs let your brain marinate, and you'll make a smarter decision than if you used only conscious thought. And—new-agey trigger warning—don't underestimate the power of the outdoors. "There's a technique called earthing, in which you go barefoot—you're actually sharing the earth's electromagnetic signals," says Orloff. Anything that connects you with nature—trees, grass, a river—helps align you with your intuitive self.

Once you've thoroughly explored your own reactions, it's fine to check in with a close friend or two, or to use your rational mind to make a pros-and-cons list or cast back to similar scenarios. But you'll do so from a better place than if you had rushed out to take an instant poll. After all, why should anyone else's advice be better than your own? Bye, Queen Bey. Hello, Queen Me. ■

## BLOCK THAT INSTINCT!

When *not* to go with your gut

It's the first day of a new job, and you keep feeling queasy. *Oh no!* you think. *I made the wrong decision—I should have stayed where I was!* But certain situations, namely those imbued with fear or anxiety, can throw off your spidey senses. Instead of assuming these are true intuitions, bring rationality to bear: If you've made a job change—or gotten engaged, or moved to another city—go over the reasons you made the decision and give your gut time to settle. Other times science has repeatedly shown that intuition isn't accurate, according to David Myers, Ph.D.:



BUYING A LOTTERY TICKET



PICKING STOCKS



DISCERNING WHETHER SOMEONE IS LYING



PREDICTING JOB SUCCESS FROM AN INTERVIEW



FEELING THAT THE PLANE YOU'RE ON WILL CRASH