

How to Tap Into Your Gut Feeling to Run Better

 runnersworld.com/training/a40911086/intuitive-running

Kiera Carter

The idea of using intuition to guide our decisions goes as far back as ancient Greece, when intuition informed the teachings of Aristotle and Plato. And yet, intuition is having a moment. Dietitians talk about “[intuitive eating](#),” trainers talk about “intuitive fitness,” and there’s now a MasterClass on “[intuitive cooking](#).”

Is intuitive running next?

It could be. I trusted my own intuition and ran my fastest (and happiest) [half marathon](#) in 12 years, and experts confirm that using this gut feeling to [guide your training](#) and racing decisions could indeed help you [run better](#).

Defining Intuition

“Intuition is the productive use of unconscious information to [make better decisions](#) or actions,” says Joel Pearson, Ph.D. in neuroscience and founder of the Future Minds Lab at the University of New South Wales, who studies intuition. “We can feel information even though it’s unconscious, and people often describe feelings in their gut, stomachs, or back of the throat.”

Pearson’s goal is to move intuition out of the *woo* and into the *real*, and his research shows that people can use unconscious information to inform conscious decisions. “Our brains take in an immense amount of information each day, but we’re only conscious of a tiny tip of the iceberg,” he says. “The bulk of the associations we make are below the surface, things that we mostly ignore in order to go about our lives.”

But they’re still there, so when you have a hunch about something, it could be based on information you aren’t overtly aware of; like, say, the connection your brain has made between mild levels of [humidity](#) and your [performance](#). Humidity is up ever so slightly and you think, *maybe this isn’t my day to go hard*, even if you don’t consciously acknowledge the sticky air.

Conversationally, when “intuitive” is placed in front of verbs like [eating](#) and running, it has come to imply trusting yourself over outside influences, like [diet pressures](#) and data, respectively. In conversations about these topics, people tend to conflate intuition with [mindfulness](#), but FYI, they’re more like cousins than twins. Intuition is a gut feeling that drives a decision, Pearson says—the reason you [sprint](#) without getting caught up in *what-ifs*, for example. Mindfulness is a sense of awareness and presence that can make you more intuitive in the long-term.

Before we get into how to tap into this seemingly magical, mystical sixth sense—and don't worry, we will—it's important to acknowledge what intuition is *not*. Intuition is not every thought that pops into your head.

“The conscious mind is loaded with self-doubt, fear, and anxiety,” says Cindra Kamphoff, Ph.D. in sports psychology and a certified mental performance consultant. Remember that intuition is based on information we aren't overtly aware of, so if you're beating yourself up and thinking you'll never hit your goal, that's pretty overt—and therefore, not to be confused with intuition. You're more likely experiencing fear and anxiety here.

And while we're at it, pain, discomfort, and fatigue in the second half of a marathon are also not part of intuition, Pearson says. This doesn't mean these feelings aren't real and valid, but they aren't intuition. Instead, they're the physical effects of running for long periods of time. While your gut can sometimes help you decide whether to push or pull back, if you stopped running whenever it got hard, you'd simply never run a marathon.

Why Consider Intuitive Running

To tap into your intuition, you need to move away from surface-level thoughts, whether they're about your to-do list, your running time, or how you wish the workout would just end already so you can get on with your day. These types of thoughts (a) distract you from your deeper needs and capabilities and (b) take you out of the present *tap tap tap* of your steps. “You're more likely to race your best when you're focused on the present,” Kamphoff says. “Sometimes, the mind holds us back.”

While running intuitively can mean taking a step back if that's what your body is craving—important for long-term success in our sport, to be sure—it can also mean pushing forward with a clear head and heart, basically booking it without letting any bullshit hold you back; otherwise known as the self-doubt, fear, and anxiety Kamphoff mentioned earlier.

I'd be skeptical if I didn't experience this firsthand. A few months ago, I ran my fastest half marathon. Cooler than the speed itself, my splits were consistent down to the second, and they were led by a feeling, a *click*, a rhythm, a dance to a beat that never changed. I had no hangups and no concept of my pace as a particular number; yet I maintained it—again, to the second—for ten miles because it felt good in the moment, only speeding up in the final three.

Pearson says this is actually *interoception*, a supreme awareness of your body that drives intuitive decisions. “You can sit some people down and say, ‘tap out your heart rate,’ and they'll just go ‘sure,’ and tap on the table,” he says. “Same with breathing, temperature, and digestion; some people are very in tune with sensing things inside their body.”

You need a certain level of interoception to make intuitive decisions in running, but once you have more body awareness, “you should know exactly what your ideal pace feels like, how much you can push, and what that means at the end of the race,” Pearson says.

How to Tap Into Intuitive Running

Pearson is very clear on this: You need experience in whatever you’re trying to be intuitive in, because intuition works by internalizing information over time. Think of it this way: You might make intuitive decisions in your current job, but you probably made fewer when you were a new intern. (To be clear, this is partially why intuition does not apply to that super-dramatic feeling that you get on a plane because you think something bad is going to happen, or when you’re swimming in the ocean and you think there might be a shark. You don’t have enough experience in these spaces, unless you’re a pilot or deep-sea diver, so this feeling is probably fear.)

In my case, I was able to run such precise splits based on gut mainly because I’ve been tracking my pace for years and knew what it was like to run in those conditions. But this doesn’t mean beginners can’t start to develop a more intuitive relationship with running. In fact, now’s a great time to start, no matter your experience level. A few guidelines:

Know thyself

“When you’re really in tune with your body, you know when to push and when to back off,” Kamphoff says, which makes intuitive decisions a lot easier and more accurate.

That’s why Chloe Steinbeck, senior Barry’s and Barry’s X instructor in San Francisco, does a check-in before every single run. “How I am feeling that day? Am I tired? Did I get a good night’s sleep? Did I have a hard workout the day before and am feeling sore?” she asks herself. “I set realistic goals after I acknowledge how I feel physically and mentally.”

Feel first

If you wear a watch or run on the treadmill, take note of what happens to your body at different speeds or inclines. Is your heart rate going up? Can you talk? How many words can you say?

“I start every Barry’s class by explaining what I believe each speed should feel like,” Steinbeck says. “This gives our clients ownership over the workout, so they know how to adjust their speeds to meet their bodies where they are that day. It also sets treadmill runners up for success when moving outside.”

In the spirit of paying attention to your body and environment, both Kamphoff and Pearson are fans of forgoing music from time to time. “Awareness is the first step to high performance, but we’re often distracted when we run,” Kamphoff says. Paying attention to

your breathing, cadence, and effort is crucial in building more body awareness.

Be watch-savvy

The problem with obsessing over numbers is that it sometimes comes along with what Kamphoff calls “future-based thinking,” or that “I’m too slow, I’m never going to hit my goal” doom-spiral. So, ask yourself *why* you’re looking at your pace.

When I was tempted to glance at my watch during that half marathon, I asked myself if I would do anything different based on the number on the screen. If the answer was, “no, I feel good and happy, and I want to do exactly this forever,” then I kept going without looking. I allowed myself to look only when I felt like I could be going too fast for my own good. If you think data could screw with your mood, then protect your mood.

Also, keep in mind that pace probably isn’t the only data point on your watch, so there are other numbers you can pay attention to instead (or in addition to) your speed. In fact, many trackers are taking a more holistic approach to fitness that—perhaps ironically—can help you tap into your intuition later.

For example, Fitbit just launched a new sleep profile to help people learn more about their sleep patterns. This can help you tune into how you feel the day after a bad or good night sleep and how that’s affecting your running. “I enjoy trail running, and I’ve noticed that when I haven’t slept, or if I’m anxious or stressed, I need to pay more attention to my footing,” Pearson says. “I need to slow down and think about it, so I’m less intuitive.”

But if you do an honest check-in with yourself and you’re feeling good, there’s just one thing to do: run intuitively. No fear. No watch. Just that gut feeling guiding you to a potential PR.

Kiera Carter

Kiera Carter has a decade's worth of experience covering fitness, health, and lifestyle topics for national magazines and websites. In a past life, she was the executive digital editor of Shape and has held staff positions at Fit Pregnancy, Natural Health, Prevention, and Men’s Health. Her work has been published by Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan, Travel + Leisure, and more. She spends her free time boxing, traveling, and watching any movie or show with a strong female lead. She is currently based in New York.

[Read full bio](#)