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Focus

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The Cat Brain in Your Gut

The brain in your head contains 100 Billion neurons. However, your gut -- stomach, small intestine, and colon -- contains a second brain. This autonomous, full-fledged brain consists of 100 Million neurons and is the only part of our body not completely controlled by our big brain. This gut brain has the power of a cat's brain, and it is connected to the emotional (limbic) system of the big brain.

Your gut/cat brain has two main functions: digestion and defense, so it's handy that it's autonomous. In addition to converting food into energy, your gut detects dangerous substances and tries to expel (vomiting, diarrhea) or otherwise neutralize them.

However, Western science is just discovering that there's more to your Cat Brain than just digestion and defense. The term "gut instinct" appears to be a physical reality. There is a constant stream of communication racing along the vagus nerve among the big brain, gut brain, unconscious mind, and conscious mind. We can, therefore, feel fear before we consciously recognize it. Your gut brain can generate strong emotions that have physical symptoms like sweating and anxiety. *It's worth noting here that these same physical reactions occur when anticipating something fearful like a public speech or something pleasant like sex.* Likewise, emotions in your big brain can give you indigestion.

So, what does this mean? First, the old paradigm of consciously controlling your thoughts to deal with stress or strong negative emotions is too simplistic. Second, be aware that the complex interplay of memory and environmental sensations can be either a handicap or a reliable early warning system. Well, you say, now that's really helpful! Well, I say, we just don't know enough science yet.

However, it is helpful to be aware of knowledge gaps, or "knowing what you don't know."

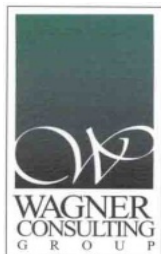
Things you CAN do include:

- 1) Listing and unpacking fears and phobias, identifying their negative impacts, and then making positive affirmations over and over until you self-talk yourself into a better place;
- 2) Identifying unconscious stress behaviors (happy feet, a slouched defensive posture, etc.) and proactively working to change those behaviors; and
- 3) Listen to your gut instinct because it is a bridge to your unconscious mind.

If this sounds a little flaky to you, please know that your unconscious mind is vastly more powerful than your conscious mind. Unconscious thought is faster and more efficient. Most of our day-to-day decisions and reactions to stimuli are largely subconscious. Recall the last time an unconscious response kicked in and saved your life, maybe on a highway, maybe while walking.

Just remember you have a little cat brain in your abdomen and that it's constantly sending signals to your big brain. Meow!

Tom



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