

# KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY USING YOUR SIXTH SENSE

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We're all familiar of course with the five senses of

sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch; but we have another whole world of sensation that is often overlooked... and it's central to our power to change our habits – and our lives – for the better.

You're already familiar with this "sixth sense," though it may still hold plenty of mystery for you. You know it when you say things like:

- "I have a gut feeling..."
- "That was spine tingling!"
- "I feel butterflies in my stomach..."
- "I felt my heart in my throat..."
- "That gave me the heebie-jeebies!"
- "I just feel it in my bones"

The sixth sense that I'm talking about is not something mystical or hypothetical. It is our *felt sense*. The physical sensations in our body: in our limbs, in our motions, and in our guts. This is a very real internal sensory experience that every one of us has access to. And growing our awareness of it can become a tremendous resource for growth and change.

Specifically, this felt sense is made up of three separate senses:

- *Proprioception*: the awareness of our motion through space and in relation to gravity
- *Kinesthesia*: the awareness of degrees of tension in our muscles
- *Visceral sensation*: our gut feelings; the perceptions of our internal needs and longings

For a quick demonstration of proprioception and kinesthesia: close your eyes, hold your arms out to the side, and wave them around. Now touch your index finger to the tip of your nose. How did you do that?

You did it because you have nerve receptors in your joints that allow you to sense your body in motion, in relation to gravity; and because you also have nerve receptors in your muscles that tell you the precise degree of tension in each.

For a quick demonstration of your *visceral* sensation: Think about something you have an emotional response to or desire for – love for someone dear to you, anger about something annoying, joy about something delightful, desire to move toward someone you care for... How do you *know* what you feel? How do you *know* what you want?

For many of us, the answer will be something along the lines of, “I don’t know, I just *know* it.” But that’s just because many of us are also not very familiar with this part of our sensory system; so we just don’t think about it.

We know it because we *feel* it from our *enteric* nervous system; a nerve complex connecting our brains with our gastrointestinal system, heart, and lungs, through our vagus nerve. This is the second largest nerve in our body – it’s about the same size as our spinal cord.

Eighty to ninety percent of this system is sensory; it carries sensory information from our guts to our brain; and this part of our nervous system in itself is more complex than the entire brain of a cat.

So when we’re feeling something in our guts, we’re, really, *feeling something* in our guts!

Why is this important? Because if we want to change our habits, we need ongoing feedback that the habits we’re heading toward are good ones. People who try to change their diet and exercise habits for the better, for example, will often do so because they want to be healthier into the future, they want to lose weight... things like that.

Those are fine reasons, but they won’t keep the new habits going for long.

When people use abstract reasons like these to change their habits, they don’t often stay with it – it’s just not an immediate enough opposition to the emotional pull of long established habits. The power of the dopamine in our brains which fuels and maintains these old habits is *extremely* compelling; we need something strong and tangible enough to counter it.

The people who *do* stick to new health habits pay attention to the feedback of their internal sensations, which tell them, “I feel better when I’m taking the time to exercise regularly; and I feel better when I eat more veggies and stay away from sugar and too much fat. I feel more energy, I feel lighter; I feel more pleasant in my insides.”

They consciously take time to notice the positive sensations from the new good habits... and they notice that they feel significantly worse with the old unhealthy habits.

This holds true for other habits as well.

Here’s a way to harness the power of your felt sense:

Take a journey through the sensations in different parts of your body. Sit comfortably, and just begin to notice whatever you sense in a particular part of your body – your chest and belly are good places to start. Notice your breathing. Look for qualities like tension, relaxation, warmth, coolness, motion, stillness, tingling, shaking.

Don’t worry about doing anything with these sensations; just notice them. Bring your conscious awareness to what you sense physically in that part of your body; then move to the next area, and continue this throughout

your body.

Make this a regular practice for a few minutes each day. As you get more familiar with the physical sensations, you can begin to distinguish more and more between physical sensations, emotions, images, and thoughts.

Let yourself explore the physical sensations, knowing they will change. Just notice what's happening now. If you start thinking about it, or following images or emotions, bring yourself back to the physical sensations. Don't try and figure out what's going on, just allow yourself to experience it.

If you make this a regular practice – like a kind of *body meditation* – you'll start to integrate a more conscious relationship with this felt sense, and you'll find that it also helps you to understand your emotions and impulses more effectively as well; and you'll be able to be more conscious of what your “gut” is telling you.

Nathaniel Branden used to say, “Feel deeply to think clearly.” This includes delving deeply into our physical sensations. The more we can nurture and explore this internal sensing of our bodies, the greater access we will have to our own internal experience as a whole.

Pay close attention to what your “sixth sense”... your felt sense, your internal sensory experience, is telling you. It's a powerful tool for taking charge of your life.

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PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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