

Emotions: The Sixth Sense

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

It was a typical sight for a summer morning on the busy streets of Mosul, Iraq. A small car parked on the sidewalk facing against the traffic; its windows rolled up and two small boys peering out the back. Sgt. Edward Tierney and his team of nine men were patrolling the area for IEDs—‘improvised explosive devices’—left by insurgents. It was 120 degrees already that morning, and the soldier closest to the car asked Sgt. Tierney if he could give the boys some water. Tierney looked at the car and his body turned cold with a sense of danger and apprehension, but he didn’t know why. Tierney knew he wanted his men out of there immediately: He denied the request for water and ordered his men to fall back. Tierney’s order gave the soldier closest to the car just enough time to turn away from the car as it exploded. The blast knocked all nine soldiers from their feet.

Tierney’s actions saved the lives of his men that morning. Yet, he still doesn’t know what provoked the sudden sense of dread that erupted deep in his gut. Nothing about the car or his surroundings seemed to suggest an attack was imminent. Still, Tierney knew exactly what this feeling meant in that moment—he had experienced it countless times upon discovering IEDs or taking enemy fire.

At the height of the US military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, military personnel encountered several hundred IEDs a month. Just 10% of these devices injured or killed military personnel. The US military has spent billions of dollars on technology to aid in the detection of IEDs. Yet, the minds of the troops on the ground remain the best detectors of IEDs. Those who have circumvented an IED attack often describe a gut feeling, like Tierney’s, that led them to the device, and the military uses experienced soldiers, including Sgt. Tierney, to train

personnel to outwit an IED attack. Thanks to recent discoveries in brain science, we now understand how emotions produce this sixth sense, and how you can use it to your advantage, even if the bombs you encounter every day are metaphorical.

As this clip from *The Hurt Locker* illustrates, it isn’t easy to distinguish friend from foe on the streets of Iraq:



[Click on the image to view this clip.](#)

How Sgt. Tierney Knew There Was A Bomb

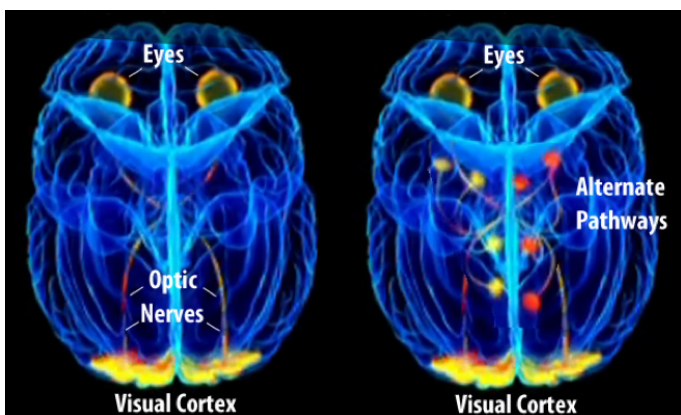
Dr. Beatrice De Gelder at Tilburg University in the Netherlands studies people with a unique form of blindness. All of her subjects suffered a stroke that destroyed the visual cortex for a single eye. Both of their eyes still work properly, and relay what they see down the optic nerve to the visual cortex, but with one side of the cortex unable to process the information, her subjects “see” nothing but blackness from one eye.

Dr. De Gelder had the clever idea of showing each of her subjects pictures to their blind eye that contained strong displays of human emotions, such as happiness, sadness, or anger. She was startled to see her subjects react with the same involuntary facial movements as subjects with normal sight. That is, the blind subjects would crack a

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smile in response to an image of extreme happiness—an image they couldn't see—just like people with regular vision. When Dr. De Gelder asked the blind subjects why they smiled (or furrowed their brow in response to an image of anger) they said it was a hunch—a mysterious sensation that compelled them to act. All other images, including images of people who were not displaying emotions, generated no response.

Dr. De Gelder took things a step further and repeated the process while giving her subjects an MRI to measure their brain activity. What she witnessed was astounding: When the blind subjects were shown images of human emotion, some of the brain signals exited the optic nerve before reaching the visual cortex and traveled to the amygdala and seven other brain regions. Among other things, these brain regions focus our attention and allow us to experience emotion. These pathways are subconscious because they have not been received by the brain's sensory system (in this case, the visual cortex), and, therefore, the brain is not aware of them. They allow us to sense emotional stimuli even though we do not "see" it, and they are only activated by human emotion.



Dr. De Gelder's Discovery

The image on the left is an MRI that showcases the passage of brain signals from the eyes down the optic nerves to the visual cortex. The image on the right highlights Dr. De Gelder's alternate pathways—brain signals that left the optic nerve and activated eight other brain regions in response to human emotion.

The pathways Dr. De Gelder discovered were not seen or understood prior to her research because they are easily overwhelmed by competition from visual stimuli. That is, once the visual cortex gets busy processing what we see, the flurry of brain activity that follows obscures the pathways' presence in MRI images, as well as our conscious awareness. In the case of Sgt. Tierney, he saw something—likely deep terror on the faces of the boys in the car—that told him the car was a threat before he consciously realized it. Sure, Sgt. Tierney saw the boys in the car, but with his attention shifting quickly and vigilantly from passersby, to the street, to the car, his men, and his surroundings, he didn't consciously "catch" the boys' expressions. The emotional and subconscious response to the car was strong and Sgt. Tierney knew from experience to trust his gut and react quickly, even if he didn't know why the car posed a threat.

The Sixth Sense at Work

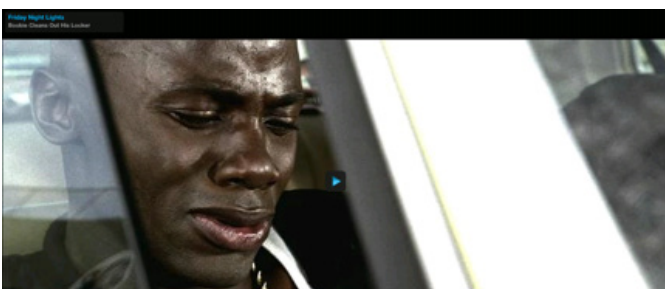
How does this sense operate in everyday life and how can you use it to your advantage?

The first thing you need to realize is that soldiers in Iraq aren't the only ones whose senses are bombarded at work. Walk into a conference room full of people and you're thrust into a situation where there is more going on in front of you than you can possibly hope to consciously absorb and process. If you sense something unusual—a

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prevailing mood in the room or something going on with a specific individual—you'll need to listen to your gut when it's trying to tell you something. For most people this is quite difficult because the “chatter” in their head gets in the way. Your gut will often tell you something that is contrary to what you think you see. If you remain focused on your own thoughts and beliefs, in lieu of your senses, you'll miss the opportunity to benefit from your sixth sense.

Emotions are complicated enough that the sixth sense comes into play even when you're interacting with a single person. Let's face it, people aren't always able to express their emotions clearly, and this means what you see is oftentimes not what's really going on beneath the surface. In these instances you'll need to learn to trust your gut more than your eyes. The clip below from *Friday Night Lights* is a nice illustration of this. The clip opens with Boobie, Permian High School's star football player, cleaning out his locker because a knee injury has cut his season short. What Boobie doesn't tell his teammates in the clip is that he's just learned the injury is career ending—he'll have to give up his lucrative college scholarship and dream of playing professionally:



[Click on the image to view this clip.](#)

Boobie's teammates know that something is up. They can sense that something more is going on with Boobie than

he lets on—something serious and heavy—but they're quieted by his upbeat attitude and cheerful banter. In the end, Boobie's teammates—his friends that he's played side-by-side with for years—don't listen to their gut. They leave Boobie to suffer his fate without their support, and, judging by how he reacts upon entering his uncle's car, Boobie needs a shoulder to cry on.

If you're focused on the experience of other people and you care about what they are going through, then you're bound to pick up on emotions that aren't spelled out for you. As you learn to master your sixth sense and harness its power, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- 1. What you see is not always what you get.** Remember the gut feeling triggered by your sixth sense will often run contrary to what you see before you.
- 2. Quiet the chatter.** When you feel something in your gut, you need to focus carefully on what it's trying to tell you, abandoning previous beliefs about the situation.
- 3. You don't have to dive right in.** Unless you're a soldier combing the streets of Iraq for IEDs, you don't have to act on your gut in a split second. Ask thoughtful questions to confirm your hunches before taking too big a step in any direction. 🌐 August 2011



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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company, Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.