

SPiRiT | *heart intelligence*

The image features four hands, two at the top and two at the bottom, positioned to form a heart shape. The hands are dark against a vibrant orange background that has a fine, dotted texture. The overall composition is symmetrical and centered.

WHOLE hearted

The heart has its own brain,
which allows it to act, learn,
remember and produce
feelings independently

More than just a muscle or the symbolic location of our feelings, the heart exerts a great deal of influence over our intuition, emotion and wellbeing. By Sonia Zadro

Throughout history, the heart has been considered the seat of love, compassion, emotion and, to some extent, intuition. We have all heard phrases like, "My heart is bursting with joy", "Follow your lead and not your heart" or "She broke my heart", which imply the heart is where we feel our pain and joy. For the Ancient Egyptians, the heart was often the only organ left in their mummies on their journey into the afterlife. For them, the qualities of the heart, such as love and compassion, were thought to be vital for the soul's existence after death. So is the heart just an organ or is its association with love, compassion, pain, joy and intuition more than metaphorical?

When I was only about five, I remember my much older sister sitting in my bedroom and talking about how she arrived at the decision to marry her fiancé. She had a checklist of points: "Makes me laugh" tick, "is good with children" tick, "Able to fix things around the house" tick, "Good provider" tick. Her fiancé basically had made it, as far as her toppling list was concerned. At the time, my highly romantic five-year-old mind was horrified. How could anyone make the most important decision of their life — and a very romantic decision — by running through a grocery checklist of pluses and minuses? What about love, attraction, Prince Charming, The One!

I would never be like that, I thought, so rational about such a decision. I still feel much the same. The heart must rule. Yet I'm afraid to say that early 30 years later I did exactly the same thing. I was told by a friend to write a list of at least 100 attributes I wanted in a partner. I came up with 117 and the man I soon attracted met 107 of them. This was great, but what had I been reduced to? Admittedly many of the attributes on my shopping list were those of the heart: "is sensitive and caring", "is selfish". But it was still a head process as far as I was concerned.

Perhaps the adage "follow your head and not your heart" was right, after all. It wouldn't be surprising, either, given the human brain contains 100 billion brain cells with 10 trillion neural connections. Such numbers are almost impossible to imagine. If I was going to rely on something to take my important decisions in life, better to rely on that than a simple, blood-pumping muscle. Despite this, I refused to submit to the idea that reason should rule. After all, the equally common adage of "follow your heart" is spoken like it's the doorway to the truth of your soul.

Finally, science is beginning to sort out this quandary. The heart is not only far more intelligent than we thought, but working with its intelligence brings enormous advantages. When we learn to focus on and sustain feelings of love, gratitude and compassion, this can increase aspects of general intelligence, improve our intuition and strengthen our immune systems. The heart has way more power than we think.

At a basic biological level, we take for granted that the heart pumps early 7.5 litres of blood every minute through 100,000km of vessels. This is equivalent to pumping blood the distance of approximately two-and-a-half times the circumference of the earth, every minute.

Research done at the Institute of HeartMath® looks at how the heart communicates with the rest of the body through nerve cells, hormones, ultrasound waves and our electromagnetic fields. Their research to date is quite fascinating.

Few people know the heart has its own separate brain. It has its own nervous system, a "heart-brain" network of 40,000 brain cells that connects it directly to our larger cranial brain. This complex network of brain cells allows the heart to act, learn, remember, make functional

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Heart meditation

Various researchers emphasise the importance of focusing on the heart to increase its influence. Dr Pearsall describes how this can overrule the brain and help it become quiet. You can learn to sustain this heart focus with meditation. Here are some tips:

● Learn to relax by slowing your breath

Find a quiet space free from distractions and focus on very gently slowing your breath right down and breathing into your belly so that when you breathe in, your belly rises, and when you breathe out, your belly drops. This diaphragm breathing will influence your entire body's chemistry to relax and slow your thinking.

● Use suggestion to deepen relaxation

Once you've relaxed a little, use suggestion to deepen the state. For example: "With every breath I let go, my muscles will loosen up, unwind and relax ... more and more ... and the more I relax, the more pleasure I will feel ... and the more pleasure I feel, the more I will relax."

● Focus on your heart

Once your breath has slowed right down, bring your attention to the physical region of your heart and imagine breathing through this area of your body.

● Experience gratitude

Once you have sustained this heart breathing for a while, think of something you are grateful for. It can be anything — your health, the warm sun, a special friend, a child — as long as it's meaningful to you.

decisions and produce feelings of the heart independently of our larger brains. The heartbeat also works independently of our larger brains. It is self-generated and does not require a signal from the brain to beat. Every single beat of our heart sends out information through our hormones, brain cells and electromagnetic waves that greatly influences our emotional states.

When we learn to focus on and sustain feelings of love, gratitude and compassion, this can increase aspects of general intelligence, improve our intuition and strengthen our immune systems.

At an electromagnetic level, the heart is more astounding. It sends out an electromagnetic field that affects and harmonises all organs and structures in the body. The electrical field of the heart is 40-60 times stronger than that of the brain. If that's not powerful enough, the magnetic field of the heart is 2000-5000 times stronger than that of the brain. This is by far the most powerful rhythmic field coming from our bodies. This field doesn't only envelop every single one of our cells, it also extends out into the space around us and can be measured several feet from the body.

Dr Paul Pearsall, a clinical psychologist specialising in the field of psychoneuroimmunology, began his research in 1993 in the area of energy cardiology. This is a merging of physics and cardiology that looks at relationships between energy, information and mind/body medicine. He teamed up with Professor of Psychology, Dr Gary Schwartz, and Dr Linda Russek, a research psychologist at Harvard University, and together they came up with several hypotheses about the nature of consciousness and human functioning.

They view consciousness as "information containing energy" and the heart as the primary generator of this information energy. The heart, which generates this energy, is seen to regulate the entire body and its cells. The cells are viewed as a holographic representation of our energetic

heart, and in this way we become the manifestation of this energy.

Another way the heart may exert its influence over cells in the body is through neuropeptides, tiny chains of amino acids that are the key to our emotional experience. They were originally found in the brain, however Dr Candice Pert showed they float all over the body. The heart, being an energetic communicator, would likely influence these substances.

The heart's emotions

But what about the feelings of love we experience that seem to be centred in the region of the heart? When people say they have a "broken heart" or are feeling hurt, they often report physically feeling it in the region of their chest. The notion these feelings are actually localised in the region of the heart is backed up by the fact that our positive and negative emotions register in the pattern of our heart rhythms.

When we focus on the heart and experience genuine positive feelings of love, compassion and gratitude, it can actually create a harmonious positive state known as "coherence". This is when our nervous system and all systems of our body are working with greater harmony, efficiency and synchronisation. The state of coherence occurs naturally when people feel positive emotions, and during sleep, but being able to sustain this state for a long time is rare. Learning techniques to intentionally induce states of love, compassion and gratitude — and sustain these feelings — is shown to have significant benefits.

But are these techniques just another version of meditation or relaxation? Most people by now know the documented health benefits of such strategies. The benefits gained from intentionally experiencing heart states such as love and compassion, however, are actually found to be much greater than those gained just from relaxation or rhythmic breathing alone. Perhaps this is one reason why people are attracted to spiritual or religious participation that encourage feeling states like compassion, love and gratitude as a part of everyday practice.

The heart and intuition

The heart seems to play a role in how we know things about another person without witnessing any of their body language. The brain and the heart seem to work in sync and both receive and process information at an intuitive level. For instance, one study found that when people touched or were at a conversational distance, one person's heartbeat signal registered in the other person's brainwaves and could influence the other person's brain rhythms. The strength of this signal was strongest when the two people were touching each other, but it could still be detected when they were close to each other without contact.

Another study suggested the ability to influence and be influenced by another person through the electromagnetic field of our heart seems to increase if we are in a "coherent state". In other words, when we experience "heart states" like love and compassion, this creates coherence or harmony in our nervous systems, which helps us tune into and be more receptive to other people's feelings. This was found to be especially evident when people were separated, particularly by large distances.

A technique called intuitive listening fits this idea. It involves focusing on the other person's heart and having an appreciative or neutral intention while listening to them. People report not only hearing the speaker's words with more clarity, but being able to sense deeper meanings and feelings contained in the communication.

These findings are one of the first successful attempts to measure how energy may be exchanged between people. They also help demystify intuition and provide one method to improve it through focusing on positive heart feeling states.

The heart and physical health

Even at a basic biological level, heart feelings can help us feel physically better and fight disease. A controlled study conducted by the HeartMath Research Center in the US found that sincere, heart-focused, positive feelings boosted the immune system, while negative emotions suppressed the immune system for several hours following an emotional experience. In this study, 30 people were divided into groups

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and some were asked to experience "anger and frustration", while others were asked to experience "care and compassion". Their immune response was monitored from samples of their saliva for salivary immunoglobulin A (S-IgA), frequently used as a measure of immunity.

In the self-induced care and compassion groups, the participants were asked to induce the state by shifting their attention to the physical area around their heart and focus on feelings of care or compassion towards a person or event. In the externally induced care and compassion state, they were asked to watch a video of Mother Theresa caring for the sick in Calcutta. Both internally and externally induced states of care and compassion increased levels of S-IgA, but only the self-induced method resulted in statistically significant increases. This, along with other findings, suggest self-induced genuine heart feelings are effective at strengthening our immunity.


What's more, our heart's electromagnetic field is suggested to be able to affect cells, water and even our DNA. The electrophysiological characteristics of the coherent heart state were measured for its ability to affect the molecular structure of water. Participants were asked to hold a beaker of distilled water for five minutes while experiencing these coherent heart state. Not only was this shown to significantly affect the water, but this same "treated" water was shown to significantly positively affect human DNA.

If this is so, the ability to create loving feeling states may not only assist our own bodies and minds, but possibly the bodies and minds of our offspring in future generations.

Head vs heart

Returning to my earlier dilemma of letting my head rule my heart, it isn't just relevant for choosing a life partner. It can also be a struggle with major life decisions such as whether to opt for the most sensible career or the most inspired. Or little decisions such as spending time with a close friend because you want to or visiting your distant relative because you feel you should. The reasons for making these kinds of decisions are complex and may even include influences from childhood experience, but it seems that cultivating heart intelligence can assist our mental processes, thereby indirectly assisting these kinds of decisions.

When we feel love, appreciation and compassion, we have more ordered patterns in our heartbeats and these orderly patterns help improve our mental abilities such as memory, creativity and concentration. On the other hand, when we are emotionally stressed, the heart emits a disordered signal that results in mental abilities such as memory and concentration being blocked. This may be partly why we find it so hard to think clearly and remember information when we are stressed, and why we think more clearly when emotionally at ease.

Perhaps my five-year-old instinct had something going for it, after all. It seems your heart is much more intelligent than you think. 

Sonia Zadro has two masters degrees in psychology and numerous qualifications in alternative healing modalities. She presently works in Sydney as a psychologist and body psychotherapist.

- ### Cultivating heart intelligence
- Make time to be grateful for one thing every day.
 - When you listen to people in daily conversation, take a slow, deep breath, relax and imagine breathing through your heart as you do so. This should help expand your "heart consciousness"
 - Write down one act of kindness you would be willing to carry out each day and follow this through for one week. It doesn't matter how small it is as long as it's something you will follow through on. After a week, notice the ripple effect of this heart consciousness in your life and make it a weekly practice.
 - Give someone you care about a gift for no particular reason.
 - Tell someone you care about how you feel about them and that you appreciate their friendship.