



Department of Human Behavior

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Hot and Cold Emotions Make Us Poor Judges

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Why would [David Vitter](#), a U.S. senator with four young children, have gotten involved with a seedy escort service? Why would [Michael Vick](#), a gifted [NFL](#) quarterback, get mixed up with the sordid world of dog fighting? Why would [Bill Clinton](#), a Rhodes scholar, six-time governor and president of the United States at 46, have an affair with an intern in the [Oval Office](#)?

It isn't just men behaving badly. Remember [Lisa Nowak](#), the married [NASA](#) astronaut who drove from [Houston](#) to [Orlando](#) (wearing diapers so she wouldn't have to make bathroom stops, police said) allegedly in order to kidnap her rival in a love triangle?

Whenever these scandals break, the rest of us shake our heads and ask, "What were they thinking?"

That feeling of incredulity is now the subject of a growing body of research. It isn't just that people find it difficult to understand or empathize with others who do crazy things. People find it very difficult to imagine how they themselves would behave when strong emotions are involved.

Studies have found that, for some reason, an enormous mental gulf separates "cold" emotional states from "hot" emotional states. When we are not hungry or thirsty or sexually aroused, we find it difficult to understand what effects those factors can have on our behavior. Similarly, when we are excited or angry, it is difficult to think about the consequences of our behavior -- outcomes that are glaringly obvious when we are in a cold emotional state.

Vitter (R-La.), for example, demanded in late June that the Title V Abstinence Education program be reauthorized: "These programs have been shown to effectively reduce the risks of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases by teaching teenagers that saving sex until marriage and remaining faithful afterwards is the best choice for health and happiness," he declared.

A little more than two weeks later, Vitter was apologizing for a "serious sin" in his past, after his telephone number was found among the telephone lists of the alleged D.C. Madam. Hypocrisy? Possibly. But if the research is accurate, what it suggests is that Vitter-the-policymaker probably finds Vitter-the-escort-service-

client as incomprehensible as everyone else does.

"We tend to exaggerate the importance of willpower," said George Loewenstein, a professor of economics and psychology at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) who has studied the phenomenon of hot and cold emotional states and the surprisingly diverse implications of the gulf that separates them.

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WHAT WERE THEY THINKING? Scandal veterans Sen. David Vitter, football star Michael Vick, former president Bill Clinton, astronaut Lisa Nowak. (By J. Scott Applewhite -- Associated Press)

Many health resolutions, for example, are made when people are in a cold state. But while they may intellectually grasp the temptation of a potato chip or a cigarette, they do not appreciate in advance how visceral the desire can be -- which is why many resolutions fail when put to the test.

Psychologist Louis Giordano once asked heroin addicts on a maintenance course of the heroin substitute buprenorphine whether they would prefer an extra dose five days later or a sum of money. He found that when addicts were asked the question right before they got a dose -- when their craving was highest -- they valued the extra dose more than twice as much as addicts who had just taken their buprenorphine. The addicts who were in a craving state viscerally understood how much they would want the extra dose later; the satiated addicts, on the other hand, overestimated how easily they could do without the fix.

Similarly, when cancer researcher Maurice Slevin quizzed medical professionals about whether they would endure grueling chemotherapy to extend their lives by only a few months, fewer than one in 10 said it was worth it -- they were evaluating the question in a cold state. When he asked patients who actually had cancer the same question -- these were dying people who were in a very hot state -- nearly half said a few more weeks of life was worth the pain of chemo.

The empathy gulf between hot and cold states, Loewenstein said, might also explain why many patients are undertreated for pain. Patients viscerally experience their agony; doctors who are coolly evaluating the situation have to make a leap of imagination across the gulf that separates hot and cold states.

Other experiments have found that shoppers at grocery stores spend more when they are hungry than they do when they are full.

The empathy gap between hot and cold states not only keeps people from realizing how prone they can be to temptation but from enjoying things as much as they could: Marriage therapists, for instance, find that couples who report being uninterested in sex are usually surprised to find how much they enjoy intimacy once an encounter takes place. Couples in a cold state don't realize how they will feel once they are in a hot state.

Loewenstein said his research made it difficult for him to serve on a university disciplinary committee, because he now empathizes with students who make mistakes in the heat of the moment. And when big public scandals break, he automatically thinks about the empathy gap that prompts so many people to be judgmental of others.

"Most people have their own vices," he said. "When we are dealing with our vices, we are shortsighted, impulsive and make ridiculous sacrifices to satisfy our vices. But when we see other people succumbing to their vices, we think, 'How pathetic.'"