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Freaky news about your brain may change your mind

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- If the sun's not out, people tend to walk in circles in a forest, desert
• If you're tone deaf, a key brain pathway may be very small
• The language you speak may help determine whether you have perfect pitch
• People's nostrils seem to compete for smell

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By Elizabeth Landau
CNN

TEXT SIZE

(CNN) -- Space. Sound. Smell. Humans constantly process a slew of variables in their surroundings. According to new research, the wiring of the brain may be even more complex than we knew.



JAN SOUMAN/MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR BIOLOGICAL CYBERNETICS
Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics had people wander around a desert.

These studies, while small, suggest avenues of research that could change the way we think about our perception of the world:

Lost? You're not walking straight

Have you ever been lost in the woods and felt as if you were going in circles? New research in the journal Current Biology suggests that, in fact, people do tend to walk in circles if they do not have a reference point such as the sun.

In one experiment, participants were taken to the Sahara Desert and given the direction of camp, then left to wander for four hours. In a second scenario, participants were dropped in a forest in Germany, also given a direction, and walked for four hours.

It turns out that, even though people thought they were going straight, they were actually going in circles when the sun was not visible. However, they did much better at this task when the sun was out.

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"Walking in a straight line is a complicated process when you think about it from the perspective of the brain," said Jan Souman, researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Germany.

Their hypothesis is that, the longer people walk, their errors in relation to a straight line build up by chance to the left or right. This may result in a zigzag pattern. Over time, the tendencies to the left or right may take the person in a circle.

The researchers are now testing these principles in a virtual reality environment, with participants walking on a treadmill that allows for changes in direction.

The lesson from this study is that, if you want to walk straight, use a landmark such as a tower, mountain, or the sun to update your direction, Souman said. If it's life-threatening that you get to your destination, bring a compass or a GPS.

These navigational technologies have allowed humans to surpass the limits of their innate skills, said David Uttal, associate professor of cognitive psychology at Northwestern University, who was not involved in this research. Other animals, such as whales and Arctic terns, are born with more advanced directional skills than humans, he said.

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