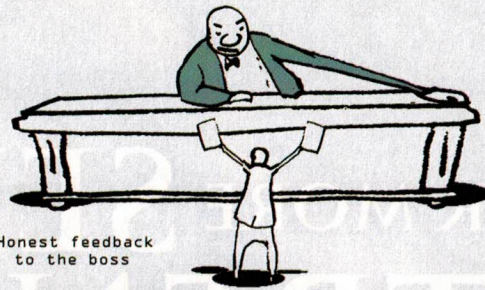




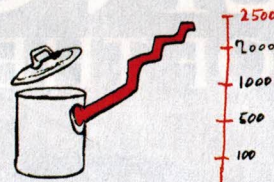
Knee sleeve



Honest feedback to the boss



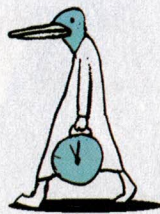
Time-outs for kids



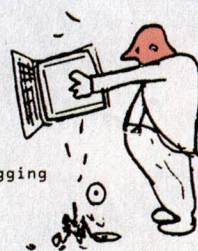
Expensive cookware



Conceiving a baby of a specific gender



Being the first and last one at work



Defragging



Waving hands to distract

Life's Biggest Mysteries—Solved!

We tracked down experts to answer the age-old question: Does that really work?

BY STEVE CALECHMAN

SOME TIME-HONORED PRACTICES SHOULDN'T BE QUESTIONED. LIKE PLAYOFF BEARDS. THE HOOK-AND-GO PASS against Uncle Fred at Thanksgiving. Ashley Judd at Kentucky basketball games. These things work and will always work. • Other ones—like blowing on hot soup—we can't be sure of. We do it because it makes sense in theory, or because we've always done it. But blind faith can lead to wasted time, lost money, even heartache. It always helps to question authority—and we've found some leading authorities. Let's start with soup.

Illustrations by ISTVAN BANYAI

Blowing on soup to cool it down

YES It works. Does it look foolish? Maybe, but between exhalations, inform your tablemates that you're merely breaking up the hovering air barrier. This allows the heat to transfer and the liquid to evaporate more quickly, leading to a decrease in temperature, says Sanford A. Klein, Ph.D., a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Now enjoy that minestrone.

Getting back together with an ex

NO Unless you enjoy rewatching sad movies with bad endings. It's hard for people to change, but easy for them to become nostalgic. There were reasons for the break, and those reasons are waiting to reappear—typically on a long car ride.

"Most people believe they're growing and learning, but most of that is job skill and not personality change," says Michael McKee, Ph.D., a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic. Okay, miracles can happen, so if you must relearn, stay vigilant, he says. Keep checking in with three places: your heart, head, and gut. If one of them is skeptical, it's a solid signal that you're barreling down a familiar road.

Giving direct, honest feedback to the boss

YES But there's a time, a place, and a way. It's not like in the movies: You can't interrupt a meeting with your dramatic truth-to-power speech and expect the boss's glare to melt into a grateful smile. But it is a performance, and you should rehearse. A practiced, positive delivery is as important as a spot-on message.

First, convey your motivation: Your comments are meant to help the boss, the clients, and the company, not to make yourself look good. Have the meeting in private when neither of you is rushed; this shows respect for your boss's time and heightens your sincerity. Give a heads-up that feedback is coming, says Steve Shuster, brand leader at W.L. Gore & Associates, Inc., whose roster of innovations includes Gore-Tex fabric. Bosses don't like surprises, except maybe finding a misplaced decimal point that saves the quarter.

Be timely and specific, so the problem becomes actionable. Avoid vague complaints. Every so often, ask, "Do you see where I'm coming from?" This prevents rambling, allows your boss to synthesize, forces you to listen, and transforms the session into a productive dialogue that builds trust. Look—he's smiling!

Stretching before working out

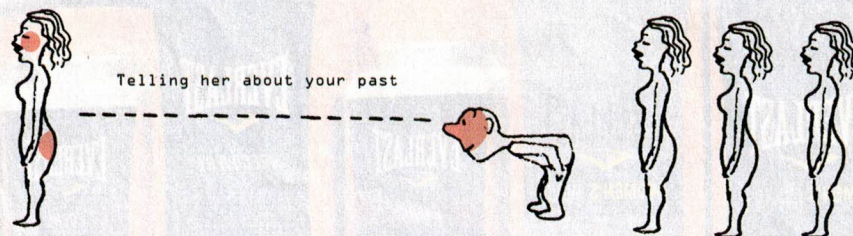
NO The classic hold-for-30-seconds routine can actually inhibit your performance. A 2008 study of 24 Division I college wrestlers in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that static stretch-

ing didn't produce any improvement and in some cases led to a decrease in measures of strength and speed.

Dynamic stretching, the same study found, is best before a workout to fire up and prepare the muscles for activity by going through a functional range, says Mark Gibson, A.T.C., director of the athletic training program at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse. For your lower body, do a walking lunge. For your upper body, try medicine-ball twists, starting at one hip and bringing the ball up and over the opposite shoulder. Do this 10 to 15 times on each side for each stretch. Feel free to smirk at the guys doing static stretches (which are okay after a workout).

Defragging every 3 months

YES And if you do it every week, your computer will respond more quickly and you won't swear at it so much. If you don't, the computer must scramble to reassemble files that have been broken up from constant creation and deletion. (It's like having a 50-page report in one handy place instead of having



two pages in the top drawer, two in the bottom, three in the file cabinet, five down the hall, one in your glove compartment...)

Use the scheduling program in your computer. Google "schedule a weekly defragmentation" and follow the steps. If you cleanse regularly, the process takes 20 minutes. But if you make it a yearly celebration, your computer will sit there doing its inscrutable thing for up to 6 hours, says Ken Colburn, president of Data Doctor Computer Services. And we know you can't survive 6 hours without your computer. We've been watching you.

Antibiotics

YES But only for their intended use. First off, antibiotics do nothing for colds or flu or anything caused by viruses. They're for bacterial infections, which a doc can I.D. pretty quickly. Frank Peacock, M.D., vice chief of emergency research at the Cleveland Clinic, explains that the drugs target specific germs to keep them from growing normally and to render them vulnerable to your body's natural defenses. The dumbest move is to stop taking antibiotics when your symptoms fade. If you

don't finish the entire prescription, you'll leave the strongest, nastiest germs behind, and these can come back with a vengeance.

Waving your hands to distract a free-throw shooter

NO At least not the way it's usually done. Random waving may look distracting, at least in that telephoto shot from behind the opposite basket. But to the shooter, it's the visual equivalent of white noise. It's annoying, but relatively harmless. Instead, everyone should move in one direction. If they all suddenly point left, the shooter's brain makes him think he's moving right, and he may subconsciously compensate.

The reflex is automatic and inescapable, says David Whitney, Ph.D., a vision scientist and an associate professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis. In addition to being tested in the lab, this unified-motion theory was tried over three NBA games in 2005. That test was instigated by *Slate* senior editor Daniel Engber, who holds a master's degree in neuroscience. It appeared to work

for two games, but not in the third. The technique has been adopted in many a snake pit, but hasn't been statistically validated.

Fog lights

YES To some extent. These beams can cut through water vapor better than regular headlights can, says Rae Tyson, a spokesman for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Fog lights are mounted low on the grille to prevent bounce-back glare off the mist—which is why high beams are your worst choice. Whether yellow light does a better job than white is a still a matter of debate.

Bruce Bonebrake, a certified ASE Master Auto Technician and host of DIY Network's *Weekend Mechanic*, says another option is driving lamps. Because these clear-lens lights illuminate the road shoulders, they're good for country roads. Don't use them all the time, and make sure they're not pointed into the eyes of oncoming drivers. The safest move in fog, all experts agree, is to slow the heck down. When you're unable to see reference points along the road, you have trouble gauging your speed.

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Guy Wisdom

Life's Biggest Mysteries—Solved!

Time-outs for kids

NO Not the way they're usually used, anyway. A long time-out will not inspire self-reflection in a 4-year-old. "That's silly," says Alan E. Kazdin, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University. Yes, remove the misbehaving child from the area, but only for a minute or two, max. When the kid returns, watch for the kind of behavior you want, and then praise it when you see it. There's no need for well-reasoned speech—fancy words will have zero effect on behavior. And if you hear yourself saying, "How many times do I have to tell you..." take that as a cue that whatever you have been doing has failed miserably.

Choosing a baby's gender

YES And it doesn't involve orange juice and bike shorts. One technique is microsorting, in which sperm are separated based on density and staining (relax, it's an external procedure) and then inserted into the uterus. The second treatment involves having her follow a drug regimen to increase egg production, and then having the eggs harvested and fertilized. Then the embryos are biopsied to check for gender, and the best one or two fertilized eggs are transferred to the uterus.

Microsorting is 60 to 90 percent reliable. The in-vitro technique is 99 percent successful for gender selection when the embryo is taken to term, says Mousa Shamonki, M.D., the director of in-vitro fertilization and assisted reproduction at UCLA. Final step: that baby-blue wall paint.

Expensive cookware

YES For some tasks, but you don't need it for everything. Invest in a high-quality sauté pan and sauce pot—you'll be repaid in durability, even heat distribution, and easy maintenance. Look for a sandwich of metals—stainless steel on the cooking surface and bottom, and copper in between, says Ed Brown, chef and owner of eighty one in New York City. You'll pay about \$65 for the sauté pan and \$95 for the sauce pot. Good cooks love a cast-iron skillet, which can be a lifelong companion; spend \$20 to \$30 on one. But for the pasta pot, save your cash. Your goal is to heat water quickly, and thin and cheap will do just fine.

Just being friends

NO Sure, you both think you're fine with the arrangement. But guess what? One person is always more interested, always holding out hope. Hanging out with her can fuel that hope and make her look for indications that you'll give in. Patience will evaporate. "You need to keep upping the ante if you stay in each other's presence. You say you won't, but you will," says Pat Love,

Ed.D., author of *The Truth About Love*. The end result: one person becomes annoying, the other annoyed. It's a classic love story.

Flu shot

YES That is, if the FDA guesses right. Each April, an agency panel meets to look at world trends and forecast the three most likely strains to hit domestically the following winter. Then private industry makes the vaccines, which takes 6 to 7 months, says Tom Skinner, a spokesman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If the predictions are correct, you're covered. If they're off, the vaccine may offer some protection, though you could still be susceptible. But you'd be susceptible anyway if you didn't receive a shot. So there's no real downside to receiving a flu shot. You big baby.

Knee sleeve, elbow sleeve, ankle brace

NO And no, and yes. The first two might look NBA-cool and give you some psychic comfort, but they provide no support for extreme movements, Gibson says. (But hey, if that psychic comfort boosts your confidence, Mr. Dwight Howard, *sir*, go ahead and wear it, *sir*.) The ankle brace, with laces that can be tightened, delivers stability.

Telling her about your past

YES "If you're buying a used car, you'd like to know where it's been," says Robyn Landow, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City. But before you confess about your worn-out tie rods, remember that there's a time and place. If it's early, take the press-release approach: Start with the bullet points, go light on the details, and stay positive about your exes. As comfort and intimacy build, gradually share specifics. Ultimately, she'll see you as a sharing kind of guy, and she'll understand why you might be gun-shy about Thai food and Coldplay.

Being first in, last out at work

NO In most cases. If face time is a big part of the job, then being there is huge. But bosses care more about production than hours. True visibility means the chief knows what you do. Make a list of goals and then meet with your boss at the start of the year to find out if you're focusing on the right things. "It can be scary to ask whether you're working on stuff that matters, but it's even worse to not know. If your goals don't matter, you'd better find some that do, or your job is at risk," says Dave Hitz, cofounder of the data storage company NetApp and author of the business book *How to Castrate a Bull*. If you've been wondering about your role, finding out is the better career choice. ■