

Mind Reading

Projection

Sometimes we take the events going on inside our own heads and assume they're also going on in another person's head. Naturally we then respond to "what they're thinking"... and get ourselves in trouble – our assumptions rarely match the other person's thoughts or feelings. Psychology calls this process "projection." I'm calling it "mind reading." Let's say I'm angry. When we interact, if I think your inner experience matches mine, I assume you're angry too. Then I start defending myself against your anger (the anger that never existed in the first place).

The whole process sounds suspiciously like delusional behavior because it is delusional behavior. We have no clue what another person is thinking. None. We can't detect thoughts; we can't discern motives; and we can't read minds.

If You Loved Me You Could Read My Mind

I used to assume that if my husband loved me he would know what I wanted. That assumption fueled a lot of hurt feelings and numerous arguments. How could he not know he should hold me tenderly before he gave me advice? Since he had to know (can't real lovers read each other's minds?), it was obvious (at least to me) that he wasn't interested in my feelings.

I didn't want to tell him to hold me and just have him comply. I wanted him to *know* he should hold me and I wanted him to *want* to hold me. If he loved me, he ought to know and he ought to follow through. He didn't.

One day I got tired of being so frustrated and said something. "I want to hear what you have to say, but it would mean so much if you held me before we talk." His eyes softened and he took me in his arms. He really hadn't known. But, once he knew, he wanted to hold me. He really did.

He loves me. And he can't read my mind. We express love differently. Such differences need to be explained, often repeatedly. I had to stop assuming he could discern my thoughts and start telling him what was on my mind.

I Know What You're Thinking

We not only expect that others can read our minds, we think we can read theirs. Not true. If we want to know what someone else is thinking either they have to tell us or we have to ask. Generally, instead of asking or telling, we project: we assume we know what someone else is thinking.

Engaging in mind reading doesn't cause problems if two people are on the same page, but, when we disagree, mind reading makes arguments almost unsolvable.

Perhaps you and I are taking a drive and you look preoccupied. I think you're bored with our conversation. You just felt the transmission slip and started worrying. I'm thinking relationship; you're thinking repair bills. We could, of course, ask each other what's going on and avoid the argument. But that takes time and seems so unnecessary. More likely, I make some remark about feeling distant from you, you get irritated because you can't pay attention to the transmission while I'm talking, I take your irritation as a sign that our relationship is deteriorating, and everything goes downhill from there. All because we assume we know each other's thoughts and motives.

If we stopped making such foolish assumptions, we might be kind instead of hurtful. Let me say it again: we can't detect thoughts; we can't discern motives; and we can't read minds. If we want to know what someone else is thinking either they have to tell us or we have to ask.

Dealing with the Loneliness

We try mind reading for various reasons. Some of us assume that our way of thinking or feeling is the only way to think or feel. We take for granted that the person we're with must think and feel like we do. They generally don't.

Most of us, however, simply get tired of feeling so isolated. Mind reading gives us the illusion that we've actually connected with another person. Even illusions feel good for a while; too bad they destroy relationships.

We need to discard our illusions, but if we do, what happens to that vague (perhaps vivid) sense of disconnection? Some people will understand us more than others, but no one else really gets it. We can appreciate many aspects of another's experience, but it does remain their experience. We may weep or rejoice with each other, but we never actually feel each other's pain or joy.

Every human relationship, no matter how wonderful, includes some loneliness. In this world, that sense of isolation never entirely goes away. We're left with God. Only He knows the depths of our hearts. Only He truly gets it. He knows. He knows me. That's one reason I like to pray – when I talk to Him I am never misunderstood and I am never alone.

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