

A new approach to '[mind-reading](#)' has been developed by researchers at the University of Bath, Cardiff, and London to improve how well we understand what others are thinking. And it transpires that women are much better than men at putting themselves in someone else's shoes.

Mind-reading, sometimes referred to in psychology as 'mentalising', is an important ability enabling us to pick-up on subtle behavioural cues that might indicate that someone we are speaking to is thinking something that they are not saying (e.g. being sarcastic or even lying).

The researchers say that we all have different mind-reading abilities, with some of us inherently better than others. The fact that not all of us are good at mind-reading can cause challenges—in particular for people with autism where it can lead to social struggles in building or maintaining relationships.

To identify those people who have difficulties and to provide them with appropriate support, the team at Bath designed a new mind-reading test, which draws on data from over 4,000 autistic and non-[autistic people](#) in the UK and US.

Results from their simple, four-step questionnaire were scored, ranging from 4 to 16 (with 4 indicating poor mind-reading abilities; 16 indicating excellent abilities). The average score for their questionnaire was between 12 and 13. After statistically confirming that the test was measuring the same thing in men and women, they found that females reported better mind-reading than males, whilst also confirming some of the well-reported social challenges faced by the autistic community.

	Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree
1) I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes	X	X	X	X
2) I sometimes find it difficult to see things from other people's point of view	X	X	X	X
3) I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective	X	X	X	X
4) I can usually understand another person's viewpoint, even if it differs from my own	X	X	X	X

Mind-reading questionnaire developed by researchers at the University of Bath.

Their method, which uses just four questions to assess individuals, is published today, along with their research findings, in the journal *Psychological Assessment*.

Dr. Punit Shah, senior author of the study and leading expert on social cognitive processing at the University of Bath's Department of Psychology explained: "We will all undoubtedly have had experiences where we have felt we have not connected with other people we are talking to, where we've perceived that they have failed to understand us, or where things we've said have been taken the wrong way. Much of how we communicate relies on our understanding of what others are thinking, yet this is a surprisingly complex process that not everyone can do.

"To understand this psychological process, we needed to separate mind-reading from empathy. Mind-reading refers to understanding what other people are thinking, whereas empathy is all about understanding what

others are feeling. The difference might seem subtle but is critically important and involves very different brain networks. By focussing carefully on measuring mind-reading, without confusing it with empathy, we are confident that we have just measured mind-reading. And, when doing this, we consistently find that females reported greater mind-reading abilities than their male counterparts."

Lead researcher, Rachel Clutterbuck, emphasised the clinical importance of the questionnaire. She said: "This new test, which takes under a minute to complete, has important utility in clinical settings. It is not always obvious if someone is experiencing difficulties understanding and responding to others—and many people have learnt techniques which can reduce the appearance of social difficulties, even though these remain.

"This work has great potential to better understand the lived experience of people with mind-reading difficulties, such as those with autism, whilst producing a precise quantitative score that may be used by clinicians to identify individuals who may benefit from interventions."

Dr. Shah added: "This research has been about understanding more about our mind-reading abilities and providing solutions to those who might struggle, particularly the autistic community. We have created a freely available questionnaire which we hope can help identify people who are experiencing mental difficulties relevant to social situations."

More information: Rachel A. Clutterbuck et al, Development and validation of the Four-Item Mentalising Index., *Psychological Assessment* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/pas0001004](https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0001004)

Provided by University of Bath

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