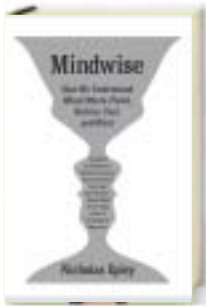


## OUR FLAWED SIXTH SENSE

**Mindwise: How We Understand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want**

by Nicholas Epley. Knopf, 2014 (\$26.95)



“Speech was given to man so that he might hide his thoughts,” wrote French novelist Stendhal. Research on how accurate we are in assessing how other people perceive us confirms his cynical assertion; the impression people give us generally corresponds poorly to their real views.

In *Mindwise*, Epley, a social psychologist at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, expertly reviews a wide range of work of this kind to help us understand our “real sixth sense”: our ability to make accurate inferences about what other people are thinking. Even by age two, humans are far better at making such inferences than the most intelligent animals are—but we *never* get very good at it.

This is important because accurate mind reading is fundamental to successful social interactions. If you believe everyone at the office party is thinking how silly you look in your new Rudolph-the-reindeer tie—even though no one is in fact paying the least attention—you might hide in a corner. If former French president Nicolas Sarkozy thinks Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not making good eye contact, he might infer—as indeed he did in 2011—that Netanyahu is “a liar.” In other words, the future of your job and relationships and even the future of humankind may depend on the accuracy of that sixth sense.

Unfortunately, the research on this topic is discouraging. Epley even admits that the main goal of the book is “to reduce the illusion of insight you have into the minds of others”—in other words, to burst your bubble of self-deception. There may be advantages to acknowledging one’s mind-reading deficits: you will be less likely to rush to judgment, he says, and more likely to give others the benefit of the doubt.

Toward the end, when it looks like Epley is finally going to show us how to overcome our deficits, we are let down. If you really want to know someone’s mind, he says, forget the two most commonly recommended methods: evaluating gestures and facial expressions and trying to imagine the other person’s perspective. Current research shows that lies are difficult to detect, even for highly trained TSA personnel, and that perspective taking actually makes one less accurate in knowing a person’s mind. Instead, he says, just ask what someone is thinking. In other words, forget mind reading; we need “to rely on our ears more than on our inferences.” That’s all he wrote.

In short, *Mindwise* is a comprehensive and well-written overview mainly of things most people would rather not know, much like a textbook on heart disease, but without the cures. —Robert Epstein



## ROUNDUP

**CREATING CONVICTIONS**

Three books explore why we believe and how to become a skeptic

Why do some adults believe in creationism despite incredible evidence against it? In **Believing: The Neuroscience of Fantasies, Fears, and Convictions** (Prometheus Books, 2013), psychiatry professor Michael McGuire reports that our brain is designed to create beliefs, even misinformed ones, about the world in which we live. These attitudes often form outside our conscious control and profoundly bias how we think and behave. By understanding the pitfalls of this system, McGuire hopes we can learn to question, even change, our ideas.

Unearthing our inner skeptic, however, may be difficult, especially in the face of increasingly sophisticated and persuasive neuromarketing strategies. In **The Brain Sell: When Science Meets Shopping** (Nicholas Brealey, 2014), psychologist and neuromarketing expert David Lewis gives us the inside scoop on how advertisers manipulate our emotions, using smells, colors, catchy slogans, unconscious biases and even subliminal messaging, to get us to buy. For instance, Starbucks tries to play on our emotions, not necessarily a love of quality coffee, by creating a “feeling of warmth and community,” writes CEO Howard Schultz. The best way to combat these strategies, Lewis says, is simply to be aware of them.

But being aware is not enough. In **Think: Why You Should Question Everything** (Prometheus Books, 2013), journalist Guy Harrison says we must also become skeptics. Harrison discusses how everyone carries personal biases, engages in flawed thinking and has imperfect memory recall, which is why employing critical thinking strategies is crucial. Learning to question our perceptions and do our own research, Harrison says, is not only good for our brain, but it also helps us resist manipulation and make more reasoned judgments.

—Victoria Stern