Can you read other people’s thoughts or they read yours?

Over the years, many people have tried to work out whether it is possible for one person to read someone else’s mind or to get them to think what the person themselves is thinking. In some ways it would be quite convenient not to have to say things and just think them to each other. There have been some instances where twins or brothers or sisters have believed that they have been aware when, for example, the other has had an accident or fallen ill, even when they have been a long way away.

People use the term ‘telepathy’ to describe this and quite a lot of people have some belief that some forms of telepathy occur. Scientists tried to test this in the 1950’s and 1960’s by using experiments. They got volunteers who would sit in one room and try to transmit a thought to someone in the next room. For example, they would look at a playing card drawn from a pack and the person in the other room would try to imagine which card they were holding. Or a set of cards with shapes or colours on them were used. The results of these experiments were not dramatic - in some cases, it seemed that the guesses were right more often than would be expected by chance but in most the results did not prove that telepathy was possible.

Of course, there are some people who believe that they have a particular ability to read other people’s minds, for example, mediums and some spiritualists. If you ask them to read a particular person’s mind, they won’t usually do so, so there is not much evidence that they can do what they actually say. Some will be tricksters, others seem to genuinely believe what they say. It is as well to have an open mind but also a reasonable one.

You may feel yourself that you have this power. If you have, does it mean that you think you can read anybody’s mind? If so, perhaps it would be worth checking this out with a close relative, friend, therapist, nurse or doctor. Thoughts can work in quite mysterious ways. They are essential to our existence but can sometimes be confusing. Have you ever had the feeling that you know exactly what someone else is thinking? It may be that something they did, which might have seemed like a sign to you, is the convincing factor.

Perhaps they said something that you are sure, they could only know if they read your thoughts. It may just be that you don’t feel that you need anything to back up your belief, you just know it to be true.

On the other hand, you might be sure that someone else seems to know just what you have been thinking about. Sometimes it can be embarrassing because the thoughts you had, were violent or sexual. Maybe you looked up and saw them watching you and that convinced you.

Try to work out what evidence you have that they can actually know your thoughts. As we said earlier, there is not a lot of evidence to support the belief that people can read each other’s thoughts. And there is no evidence that someone can broadcast their thoughts to people around them, even though you can sometimes be absolutely convinced that that is happening. Nor is there evidence that thoughts can be put into your mind or taken out by other people.

Talk with a health worker. See if you can test it out, if you’re not convinced. When you are feeling very sensitive, these sorts of beliefs can develop and worry you. They are really an unfortunate diversion from dealing with practical and emotional problems you may have.
How can the TV, music or radio refer to you?

The TV, radio and music form an important part of most people's lives. They provide relaxation and information but sometimes the things they seem to be saying can seem to become just too personal.

It can seem like the TV presenter, for example, is saying things which must refer to you and you alone. He or she seems to know things about you that are personal and which you may have thought nobody else knew about. They may seem to refer to you by name. It can be very convincing and loud. Certain programmes seem particularly likely to cause problems; the News has been shown to be one, but documentaries and programmes like EastEnders or Frazier can also have the same effect.

Words in songs may seem to be directly related to what you are thinking in an uncanny way. It can be hard to believe that they can be intended for anyone but you alone.

When this happens, it can be worth just checking with someone who is with you - if anyone is with you - if they heard anything strange. Perhaps ask, for example, 'I thought I heard my name called, did you hear it?'

It is worth noting down what times of day and which programmes seem to be related to the problem, or note what is said about you, or what is being said as part of the song. If it is a song or you've got a video of the programme, going over it with a therapist, nurse, doctor or somebody you get on with, may help you work out what is happening.

Of course, sometimes people are referred to on TV, etc, when they've done something that is newsworthy but it is also possible that thoughts may have got muddled, things misheard or voices caused the problem. If voices might be the problem, you might want to look at 'Understanding voices' another leaflet in this series.

Having constant references to you can be very disconcerting, particularly when the references are critical or abusive as they often seem to be. When you have been under pressure or depressed, you can be very sensitive to things happening and this can be very confusing. It can mean you can be oversensitive. After all, why should people on the TV or radio refer to you? What could you possibly have done that could deserve that? It can help to talk these fears and concerns out with other people. Although it is best to talk about them to people who can help, they might just puzzle strangers. It is worth working out what may help.

And strangers?

When you are walking in the street or any public place, sometimes it can seem that people are talking about you or laughing at you. This can be very upsetting and worrying and even stop you going out. Because they look at you and then talk or laugh, it may seem reasonable to assume that they are referring to you. But they may just be thinking about other things—why is it that you think they are referring to you. If you were dressed or behaving strangely they might but if not, why? When you are feeling stressed, you can be very sensitive—over-sensitive—and sometimes these beliefs can develop out of that.

Coping with ideas of reference or thought broadcasting

- keep a diary to note when it happens (your therapist can give you one):
- discuss your diary with your family, good friend or health worker
- unless it is too distressing or your health worker suggests it, don’t stop watching TV, or going out, etc. This just limits your life.
- why should it/they refer to you? Talk to your health worker, family or good friends about any possible reasons
- medication may help, talk with a doctor about it

Research about thought broadcasting and reference.

The feeling that you are being referred to when that is not taking place is quite common. But when it becomes a fixed belief that doesn’t seem to be based on good evidence, it can be distressing and seriously interfere with living. Cognitive behavioural therapy uses discussion of such beliefs to understand them better and perhaps put them into context so that things are not, inappropriately, taken personally. The information on this site has been carefully researched and results of randomised controlled studies in ‘treatment-resistant schizophrenia’ have recently been published showing the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural techniques.


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