

# Successful cooperation depends on good mind reading abilities, research suggests

July 13 2023

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A person's "mind reading ability" can predict how well they are able to cooperate, even with people they have never met before.

Researchers at the University of Birmingham found that people with strong [mind](#) reading abilities—the ability to understand and take the perspective of another person's feelings and intentions—are more successful in cooperating to complete tasks than people with weaker mind reading abilities.

These qualities, also called "[theory of mind](#)," are not necessarily related to intelligence and could be improved through [training programs](#) to foster improved cooperation, for example in the workplace or in schools and colleges.

Lead researcher Roksana Markiewicz explained, "As a psychology researcher, I often get asked if I can read minds and while this is often said to me as a joke, humans do have mind reading abilities. Our study shows that these qualities are clearly important in activities that require cooperation."

In the study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: LMC*, the team measured theory of mind in over 400 participants. Participants were then sorted into pairs and joined a researcher on a zoom call where they played a series of communication games. Each player had a set of visual clues on their screen, which could not be viewed by their partner. They had to communicate about the different sets of clues and use them together to solve a puzzle.

Players who had high theory of mind (ToM) abilities and who were matched with people who had similarly high ToM scores cooperated more effectively than players matched with low ToM abilities. The researchers suggest that this is because of a heightened ability to align in the same mental space and to recover rapidly when misalignment occurs.

Similarly, the researchers found that failures in cooperation were more common among participants with low ToM abilities. They suggest this is

because these participants found it harder to find ways to align their thinking, leading to more frequent mistakes, and poorer recovery from mistakes.

"We show for the first time that cooperation is not all about you," says Roksana. "Even if you have excellent mind reading abilities yourself, it will still be advantageous to cooperate with someone with similar abilities, so choose your [cooperation](#) partner wisely."

**More information:** It's not all about you: Communicative cooperation is determined by your partner's theory of mind abilities as well as your own, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2023).

[dx.doi.org/10.1037/xlm0001268](https://doi.org/10.1037/xlm0001268)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Successful cooperation depends on good mind reading abilities, research suggests (2023, July 13) retrieved 29 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-successful-cooperation-good-mind-abilities.html>

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