

It wasn't about you

A short book about taking other people's moods and
remarks personally

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. Someone near you is quiet, or short, or slow to reply, or gives you a look, and before you've thought about it you know what it means. It's about you. Something you did, or something they think of you, and the rest of the evening goes on working out which. Most of the time you never find out, and by the next day they're fine, and you've spent four hours on a thing that turned out not to exist.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. Sometimes it is about you, you've been right before, and reading the people around you feels like the opposite of not caring. The second is that the reading is mostly a trick of position. You're at the centre of your own day, so you appear at the centre of everyone else's, and there's research that measures this as a bias, not a sensitivity. We read other people's minds by adjusting from our own and stopping early. We explain their behaviour by what they think of us when their day explains it better. The third is practical. When you take something personally, you write the other account before you believe your own, and if it matters, you ask. Chapters 19 to 22 cover how.

This book never says that nothing is about you. Some things are. It says that most of the readings you make are wrong in a predictable direction, that they cost you evenings and cost the people around you something too, and that there's a cheaper way to find out.

Two cautions.

If the feeling of being watched and judged is constant, across every social situation, with dread before and worry long after, and it's shaping what you'll do and where you'll go, that may be more than a habit. The NHS describes social anxiety in those terms and says it's common and treatable. See a GP, or in England refer yourself to NHS talking therapies.

And if the moods in your house really are aimed at you, with contempt in them or fear, this book isn't about that. It's about ordinary people of good will misreading each other. If you're frightened of someone you live with, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline is free and open day and night on 0808 2000 247.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The short email

At ten past two your manager replies to the report you sent this morning. Two lines. "Thanks. Let's discuss Thursday." No comment on the work, no thanks for the weekend you spent on it, no sign-off. You read it three times. By half past two you've decided the report is a problem, that Thursday is the meeting where you'll hear about it, and that the two lines were the sound of someone holding something back. The afternoon is gone.

At dinner your partner is quiet. Not hostile, just not there. They answer when spoken to and look at their plate. You run through the day for what you did. The thing you said this morning about the bins. The plan you changed without asking. You don't raise it, because raising it would be admitting you'd been counting, and the evening passes in a silence that you're sure is about you.

A friend takes a day to reply to a message that you'd have answered in a minute. When the reply comes it's fine, cheerful, ordinary, and you spend a further hour deciding whether it's a little too cheerful. And on the way in from the car, the neighbour at number four looks straight at you and doesn't wave.

These are invented, but I'd guess you recognised more than one, and I'd guess you recognised what they have in common. In each case there was a piece of behaviour, a two-line email, a quiet dinner, a slow reply, a look, and in each case you knew immediately what it was about. It was about you. You didn't decide that. It arrived as a fact, the way the colour of the wall arrives, and everything afterwards was working out the details.

Some words. I'll call the interpretation that it's about you **the reading**. The raw material, the email or the quiet or the look, I'll call **the remark** or **the mood**, depending on which it was. The explanation that has nothing to do with you, which you rarely reach, I'll call **the other account**, and what the other person has been through that day, which the other account is usually made of, **the day behind it**. The time you spend on the reading afterwards I'll call **the evening**, because that's usually when it happens. Asking, in one plain sentence, I'll call **the check**. Going through your week for the thing you must have done I'll call **the search**. And I'll call it **leaving it** when you put a reading down without checking, which is the right answer more often than you'd think.

Before you go on, do one thing. For a week, keep a list. Every time you take something personally, write down the remark or the mood in a few words, and the reading. Then, if you ever find out what it was actually about, write that down too. Most people who do this find that the list is long, that they find out in fewer than half the cases, and that in the cases where they do find out, the reading was wrong nearly every time. That gap is what the rest of the book is about.

Why the reading seems right

Before I argue with the reading, I want to say what it does for you, because it isn't nothing and you're not a fool for making it.

Sometimes it is about you. Your manager has, at least once, sent a short email because there was a problem with your work. Your partner has, at least once, been quiet at dinner because of something you did. The reading has been right, and a habit that's been right is hard to give up.

It's alert. A person who notices moods is a person who's paying attention, and the alternative seems to be the colleague who never notices anything, who talks over the quiet dinner and misses every signal in the room. You'd rather be the one who notices.

It protects. If the short email is a warning, you'd rather know now than on Thursday. The reading is an early warning system, and early warnings are worth some false alarms.

It's what caring people do. Reading the moods of the people close to you is part of being close to them. Someone who took their partner's silence as nothing to do with them would seem, from the inside, to be someone who didn't care.

You've been right before, and you remember the times you were. The times you were wrong mostly went unrecorded, because you never found out, and the evening ended and the next day they were fine and you moved on.

The memory works in the reading's favour too. The time the short email really was a warning is filed and easy to reach, because it had a Thursday attached to it. The forty times a short email was just short have no ending and no file, because nothing happened and nothing was learned. So when you consult your experience, your experience says the reading is often right, and your experience is a record of the hits with the misses left out.

And it feels like sensitivity. You're a person who picks things up. It's a quality, not a fault, and a book that wants to change it can seem to be asking you to be coarser.

There are needs under all of this. A need to know where you stand. A need not to be blindsided. A need to be the kind of person who notices. A need to matter enough to be the cause of things. Those are real, and the method later in the book is built to meet them better than the reading does. What I'll show is that the reading isn't sensitivity. It's a specific error with a measured direction, and that the noticing you value is a different act from the conclusion you draw, and can be kept while the conclusion goes.

"It was obviously aimed at me"

Start with the belief that arrives as a fact. The short email was aimed at you. The quiet was directed at you. It wasn't a guess. It was obvious.

Allan Fenigstein, in 1984, ran three studies with over two hundred students that measured what he called the self-as-target bias. In the first, students waiting for their exam results were told that the teacher had singled out one paper as especially good, or especially bad. Asked whose it was likely to be, they were more likely to think it was theirs than a classmate's, whichever way the paper had been singled out. In the second, students in a group overestimated the chance that they, rather than someone else in the group, had been picked for a demonstration, whether the demonstration was described as pleasant or unpleasant. In the third, students who scored high on public self-consciousness, meaning they think a lot about how they appear to others, were more likely to read hypothetical social situations as being relevant to or aimed at themselves.

Those were students and the situations were small. But the pattern is the one I'd ask you to hold. People overestimate the chance that they're the target of whatever is happening around them, in both directions, good and bad, and the people who do it most are the ones most aware of being seen.

Why would that be? I think the answer is position, and this is my reading rather than Fenigstein's. You are, necessarily, at the centre of your own day. Every event in it happens to you or near you, and

you're the one constant across all of them. So when something happens near you, a look, a tone, a silence, you're already standing where the target would be, and it takes no work at all to conclude that the target is you. It would take work to conclude otherwise. You'd have to construct another centre, with another person's day in it, and nobody does that by reflex.

A car alarm going off in a street is a fair comparison for two sentences. Everyone in the street looks at their own car, and the alarm was aimed at none of them.

So when the reading arrives as obvious, that's what obvious feels like from the centre. It isn't evidence. It's the view from where you're standing, and everybody in the street is standing in the same place.

"I can tell what they're thinking"

The reading comes with a picture of the other person's mind. Your manager is thinking the report was weak. Your partner is thinking about the bins. You don't just know it's about you. You know what they're thinking about you, and that feels like a skill.

Nicholas Epley and colleagues, in 2004, ran five studies on how people work out what someone else perceives. The finding was that we start from our own view and adjust from it. We don't build a picture of another mind from scratch. We take our own and move it a bit. People were slower to say that another person's view would differ from their own than to say it would be similar. Under time pressure, their estimates got more like their own view, not less. When offered a reward for accuracy, they adjusted further. And the adjustments tended to stop early, at the first plausible answer, rather than continuing to where the other person actually was.

Apply that to the quiet dinner. You're anxious about the plan you changed. You look at your partner's silence and ask what's in their mind. The research says you start from what's in yours, which is the plan, adjust a little, and stop at the first plausible answer, which is that they're thinking about the plan. The reading isn't a reading of them. It's your own state, moved a little, and the moving stopped early. That's why the reading always seems to know what they're thinking, and why what they're thinking always turns out to be the thing you were already thinking about.

There's an older finding, used in several earlier books in this series, that people overestimate how visible their own inner states are to others. Thomas Gilovich and colleagues called it the illusion of transparency. I mention it because it's the same error from the other side. You think your state shows, and you think their state is legible, and both come from the same place, which is that your own state is so vivid to you that it colours everything, including your picture of what's in someone else's head.

So the belief in this chapter is half right. You can tell what someone's thinking, in the sense that you can produce a confident picture of it in under a second. What the research says is where the picture comes from, and it comes from you.

"Why else would they be like that?"

Here's the question the reading always wins. If it's not about me, what is it about? Your partner was fine this morning. Your manager usually writes more. Something changed, and the only thing you can see that changed is you.

Daniel Gilbert and Patrick Malone, in a 1995 review, described what psychologists call the correspondence bias, which is the tendency to explain a person's behaviour by their character or their intentions when the situation they're in explains it perfectly well. It's one of the most reliable findings in the field, and the review set out four separate mechanisms that produce it. The one I'd ask you to notice is the first, which is simply not being aware of the situation. You can see the behaviour. You can't see what produced it. So you explain it with what you can see, which is a person, and what you know about that person's relation to you, which is that they're your manager, or your partner, and you sent a report, or changed a plan.

What you can't see is the day behind it. Lisa Story and Rena Repetti, in 2006, had forty-three couples keep diaries for five working days, recording what happened at work and how they behaved at home that evening. On days when either partner had had difficult interactions with people at work, they were angrier and more withdrawn with their spouse that evening. For the wives, a heavy workload did the same. The researchers tested what carried the effect and found it was mood. A bad day made a bad mood, and the bad mood came home and became silence at dinner. Forty-three couples is a small sample, and the study is

about ordinary working couples rather than a general law. But it's a direct answer to the question at the top of this chapter. Why else would they be like that? Because of something that happened at work, which you didn't see, and which produced exactly the behaviour you're reading as being about you.

That's what the other account usually is. Not an exotic explanation. The day behind it. Your manager's two lines were written at ten past two between a meeting that ran over and another that was about to start, and the report didn't come into it. Your partner had a conversation at eleven with someone who was unpleasant, and carried it home, and the bins never crossed their mind.

Chapter 19 is about writing that account on purpose, because the research says you won't reach it by reflex. The reflex stops at the first person in view, and the first person in view is you.

"I must have done something"

Once the reading has arrived, the search begins. What did I do? You go back through the day, and then the week, looking for the offence, and you find it. The thing about the bins. The joke on Saturday that might have landed wrong. The plan.

Notice how the search works. It starts from the conclusion and looks for a cause, and it always finds one, because a week always contains something. There is no week in which you did nothing that could be read as an offence by someone looking for one. The search isn't discovering that you caused the mood. It's producing a candidate for a role that's already been cast, and the candidate is whatever's nearest.

Fenigstein's students did a version of this. Told a paper had been singled out, they didn't think "which of us might that be", they thought "mine", and then presumably remembered the question they weren't sure about. The certainty came first and the reason after. In the search, the reason always looks like the cause because it was found in the light of the conclusion.

There's a plainer way to see it. Your partner has, on the evidence of Story and Repetti and of ordinary life, not thought about the bins since the moment you mentioned them this morning. It was a sentence about bins. It went where sentences about bins go. The thing you found in the search, the offence that explains the quiet, has been living in your head all day and nowhere else. You're the only person in the house who remembers it, and you're using it to explain the behaviour of the other person, who doesn't.

I'm not saying you never cause a mood. Chapter 24 is about the times you do. I'm saying that the search can't tell you when, because it finds an offence every time, and a test that comes back positive every time isn't a test. If you want to know whether you did something, the search won't tell you. The check will, and that's chapter 20.

"I can feel the atmosphere change when I walk in"

Some readings are about a room rather than a person. You walk into the kitchen and the conversation stops. You join the table at lunch and the laughter tails off. The atmosphere changes when you arrive, and you feel it, and you know what it means.

Fenigstein's second study is the one to hold here. Students in a group were told that one of them had been chosen for a demonstration, and asked how likely it was to be them. They overestimated it, whether the demonstration was described as something they'd enjoy or something they wouldn't. The group was the setting and the self was the presumed target, and the direction didn't matter. That's the kitchen. Something happened in a group as you arrived, and you were the first candidate for its cause, because you're always the first candidate.

Consider the other accounts, because there are several and they're all ordinary. The conversation was ending anyway, and you arrived at the end of it. The conversation was about something private, and would have stopped for anyone. The people at the table had run out of things to say and your arrival was the natural break. Or, and this one is worth sitting with, you walked in carrying the reading already, braced for the atmosphere to change, and a person who walks in braced changes an atmosphere. People respond to a face, and the face you brought was the face of someone expecting to be unwelcome.

That last one isn't a criticism. It's a mechanism. The reading doesn't only misinterpret rooms. It shapes them, because you enter the room as a person who's already concluded something, and rooms are made of people responding to each other's faces. Some of the atmosphere you feel change is the atmosphere you brought.

The check is awkward for a room, so mostly this is one to leave.

"Probably the end of a conversation." And the practical test is the one from chapter 9. If what arrives when the room goes quiet is a question, "I wonder what they were talking about", you've noticed. If it's an answer with you in it, you've read, and the answer is worth as much as any other reading, which is very little until it's checked.

"If I stop, I'll miss it when it is about me"

This is the fear that keeps the reading in place, and it's a reasonable one. If you stop reading the moods, you'll walk into Thursday's meeting unprepared. You'll miss the signal that your partner is unhappy until it's too late. The reading is a cost, but it's insurance.

Geraldine Downey and Scott Feldman, in 1996, studied a trait they called rejection sensitivity, which is the disposition to anxiously expect rejection, readily see it, and react strongly to it. In one experiment, people high in it perceived intentional rejection in behaviour that was deliberately ambiguous, where others didn't. In a study of new couples, those who'd entered the relationship anxiously expecting rejection saw it in their partner's ordinary insensitivities. And in the final study, rejection-sensitive people and their partners were both less satisfied with the relationship, and the researchers could trace the dissatisfaction to the things the reading produced. Jealousy in the men. Hostility and less support in the women. The reading wasn't protecting those relationships. It was one of the things wearing them down.

I'd put that against the insurance idea. Insurance pays out when the bad thing happens. The reading pays out nothing when your partner is unhappy with you, because you'll still have to find out what about, and the reading can't tell you. What it does is make you behave, on the evenings when nothing is wrong, as though something is. Cooler, warier, hurt about a thing that didn't happen. And a partner who's met that a few dozen times learns something about how they're being watched.

So the fear has it backwards. You won't miss it when it's about you, because when it's about you, you can ask, and people who are unhappy with you will mostly tell you when asked plainly. What the reading costs is all the evenings when it wasn't about you and you behaved as though it was. The check protects you. The reading doesn't. It just feels like it does, because it's always on.

"I'm just sensitive"

Some readers will say that this is just who they are. They pick things up. They notice the shift in a voice, the half-second before a reply, the look that others miss. It's a quality, and a book that wants them to stop noticing wants them to be someone else.

I'd agree that noticing is a quality, and I want to separate it from the reading, because they've been fused and they're not the same act.

Noticing is perception. Your partner is quieter than usual. Your manager's email is shorter than usual. The friend's reply took longer than usual. All of that is true, and noticing it is a skill, and I'm not asking you to lose it. A person who notices these things is more useful and kinder than one who doesn't, because they can ask, and offer, and adjust.

The reading is a second step. It takes the noticed thing and supplies a cause, and the cause is you. That step isn't perception. It's inference, and it's the inference that Fenigstein, Epley and Gilbert's work is about, and it runs wrong in a known direction. The sensitive person and the person who takes things personally do the same first step. They part at the second.

Here's how you can tell them apart in yourself. Noticing produces a question. "They're quiet. I wonder what's happened." The reading produces an answer. "They're quiet. It's because of the bins." If what arrives after the noticing is a question, you've noticed. If it's an answer with you in it, you've read.

There's a test for which one you did, and it's the second sentence. After "they're quiet", what came next? If it was "I wonder if the meeting went badly", you noticed and then wondered, and the wondering had them in it. If it was "it'll be the bins", you noticed and then read, and the reading had you in it. The second sentence is where the two paths split, and it's the second sentence the method works on.

So keep the noticing. It's the part that makes you good company for people having a bad day, once the reading gets out of its way. What the book asks is that after you notice, you hold the question open for long enough to write the other account, and that's a smaller change than becoming someone else. It's noticing, then a pause, then a question instead of a verdict.

"They should have said if it wasn't about me"

There's a complaint under some readings, and it's aimed at the other person. If the quiet wasn't about you, they could have said so. A word at the door. "Bad day, nothing to do with you." They didn't, so either it was about you or they didn't care enough to say.

Look at it from their side of the table. Your partner came home with a bad day and sat down to dinner and was quiet. From where they sit, nothing happened. They were tired. They didn't make a face at you or say a sharp word. They ate dinner. The idea that a reading was made, that you'd concluded something and were now waiting for it to be denied, is not available to them, because the reading happened inside you and made no sound.

So "they should have said" asks them to deny a thing they don't know was asserted. It asks them to manage a process they can't see, and then holds the silence against them as further evidence. That isn't fair to them, and more to the point it doesn't work, because the people you live with will never reliably announce the cause of every mood, and if that's the condition for you not taking it personally, you'll take everything personally for the rest of your life.

An earlier book in this series is about the mirror image of this habit, expecting the people close to you to know what you need without being told. It's named in the notes. This chapter is the same argument the other way round. They can't read that you've made a reading, any more than you can read what's in their head,

and the same fix applies, which is that things get said out loud by the person who wants them known. If you want to know whether it was about you, that's you. The check is chapter 20.

"But they were rude"

Sometimes the remark really was sharp. The email wasn't just short, it was curt. The tone at dinner wasn't just quiet, it had an edge. You're not imagining that. So it was about you.

I'd separate two things that the reading runs together. Rude, and about you. A person can be rude to you without it being about you, and in fact that's how most rudeness works. The colleague who snaps in the corridor snaps at the next person too. The partner with an edge at dinner would have had the same edge with anyone at that table. The rudeness is real. Its cause is the day behind it, and you happened to be the person standing in front of them when the day came out.

That's not a comfortable thought, because it means you were treated badly for no reason connected to you, and there's a part of the mind that would rather have caused it, because a cause is something you can fix. If the edge was about the bins, you can sort the bins. If it was about a meeting at eleven that you weren't in, there's nothing to do but wait for it to pass. The reading prefers the first because the first gives you something to do.

But the second is usually true, and it comes with something the first doesn't. If the edge is their weather and not your fault, you don't have to absorb it. You can notice it, name it to yourself as their day, and decline to spend the evening on it. Rudeness that isn't about you is something that happened near you, like weather, and weather doesn't require you to work out what you did.

There's a limit here, and I'll say it. If someone is rude to you regularly, and only to you, and it's got a pattern, then chapter 14 is about how to tell, and chapter 24 is about what to do when the check confirms it. Rudeness that's aimed is a real thing and this book doesn't deny it. But the single sharp email, the one edged evening, is almost always the day behind it, and treating it as about you gives it a power over your evening that it didn't earn.

"I go over it to work out what they meant"

The evening has a justification, and it's that you're thinking it through. Replaying the email, the tone, the look, turning it over to work out what they meant. That's analysis, and analysis is how you understand things.

Here's the trouble with it. No new information arrives during the evening. You have the two lines of the email, and you had them at ten past two. Every hour you spend on them is an hour of rearranging the same two lines, and the rearranging produces confidence without producing knowledge. By nine o'clock you're sure of what the email meant, and you have exactly as much evidence as you had at ten past two, which was two lines.

What the evening does is run the reading again and again, and each run makes it more familiar, and familiar feels like true. By the end of the evening the reading has the solidity of a memory, and you'll go into Thursday holding it as a fact about your manager rather than as a guess you made on Tuesday afternoon and then rehearsed.

There's a body of research on going over difficult experiences, and an earlier book in this series is about it. One finding I'll borrow, from Ethan Kross and colleagues in 2005, is that the difference between going over something usefully and going over it harmfully lies in the distance. Analysing an experience from a step back, as an observer might see it, tends to reduce distress, where re-immersing in it from the inside tends to increase it. The evening is immersion. It's living the email again from the receiving end. If

you're going to think about it at all, the other account in chapter 19 is the step back, because it requires you to stand somewhere other than the centre.

The evening runs longest on messages, and it's worth saying why. A message has no face, no tone and no follow-up. It's the two lines of the email without even the manager's usual style to compare them to, and it arrives at a time of day when you're tired and the reading runs fastest. A message read as cool at ten o'clock is a message that gets reread until one, and every rereading is the same eleven words. If a message lands after nine and reads as cool, the most useful thing to do with it is nothing until morning, when the eleven words will usually turn out to be eleven words.

But mostly the answer to the evening is that there's only one source of new information about what the email meant, and it's the person who wrote it. Everything else is you, alone, with two lines, for four hours. Chapter 20 is about asking. Chapter 21 is about leaving it. Either is better than the evening, and both are shorter.

"Asking would be needy"

The check is the obvious answer, and there's a reason you don't do it. Asking seems needy. "Is everything all right?" sounds like a person who needs reassurance. "Was there a problem with the report?" sounds like a person who can't take two lines without falling apart. Better to sit with it than to show it.

Two things. The first is a study that's been used in earlier books in this series and applies here. Kenneth Savitsky, Nicholas Epley and Thomas Gilovich, in 2001, found that people expect to be judged much more harshly for their slips and awkward moments than observers actually judge them. The fear of looking needy is one of those forecasts. From the inside, "you seem quiet, is everything all right?" is an exposure. From the outside, it's a kind sentence that most people are glad to hear, and that the tired person at the dinner table will usually answer with the day behind it, and a little gratefully.

The second is what the check is and isn't. It isn't "are you angry with me?", which puts you at the centre again and asks them to manage your reading. It's a question about them. "You seem quiet tonight." "Was that a rough one at work?" "Just checking Thursday's a normal catch-up and not about the report?" One sentence, plain, aimed at their day and not at your standing. That's not needy. It's the noticing from chapter 9, said out loud, and it's the single most useful thing a person who notices moods can do with what they've noticed.

There is a version of asking that is what you're afraid of, and it's worth naming. Asking the same question every evening, or asking for a verdict on yourself, or asking in a way that requires a long reassurance before you'll believe it. That's reassurance seeking, and it wears people down, and it's a different habit with its own logic. The check isn't that. The check is asked once, about them, and the answer is accepted. If the answer is "I'm fine, just tired", that's the end of it, and the evening is yours again.

"It's always me they're like this with"

Here's a belief that feels like evidence. They're not like this with other people. With their friends they're warm. With you they're short. So it must be you.

I'd ask about the sample. You see how they are with you. You see how they are with other people at parties, at the school gate, on the phone, in short public stretches where everyone is warm. You don't see how they are in the car alone, or at eleven at night after a bad day, or at the kitchen table when nobody's watching, because the only person at that kitchen table is you. Your sample of them is the private one, and everyone else's sample is the public one, and you're comparing your private sample to their public one and concluding that the difference is you.

Story and Repetti's couples were angrier and more withdrawn at home on bad work days. Not at work. At home. The bad day was carried into the one place it could be put down, which is the place with the person who'll still be there tomorrow. That's not a sign that you're the problem. It's a sign that you're the safe one, and being the safe one means getting the weather that the public sample never sees.

If you want to test this, compare notes. Ask their sister, or an old friend, whether they go quiet when they're tired. You'll usually hear a laugh and a story about a car journey in 2009. The quiet at dinner is the quiet they've always had. It's not aimed. It's what they're like when the day has been long, and you're the person who gets to see it, which is a different thing from being the reason for it.

There's an honest exception, and it's in chapter 24. If they're warm with everyone and cold with you, consistently, over months, and the check doesn't clear it, that's information. But "always me" usually means "I'm the only one who's there for it", and those aren't the same.

"They did it on purpose"

The strongest readings have intent in them. The email wasn't merely about you. It was meant to land as it did. The two lines were chosen. The quiet at dinner was a message. They know what they're doing.

Most behaviour isn't planned. The two-line email was written in ninety seconds between meetings by a person who wrote eleven other two-line emails that afternoon. The quiet at dinner was a person too tired to talk. Intent is a story the reading adds, because a message that was meant is easier to be hurt by, and being hurt is what the reading is for.

Downey and Feldman's rejection-sensitive participants did exactly this. Shown behaviour that was deliberately ambiguous, they saw intentional rejection where others saw ambiguity. The word the researchers used was intentional. It wasn't that these people saw more coldness. It was that they saw purpose behind it. And in the new couples, the partner's ordinary insensitivities, the forgotten call, the distracted answer, were read as meant.

I'd offer a plain test for intent, which is effort. A planned message takes effort, and effort leaves marks. A person who wanted their email to sting would write more than two lines, because two lines can't be aimed. A person who wanted their silence to be a message would break it to make sure you'd got it. The absence of effort is the mark of the day behind it. Tiredness is short and quiet, and so is intent, and the way to tell them apart is that tiredness doesn't follow up.

If you need to know, the check settles it in a sentence, and it's the only thing that does. But I'd ask you to notice how often the reading supplies intent, and how rarely the world does. People are mostly not thinking about you. That's the hard part of this book, and it's also the relief.

"I'll just be extra nice to make up for it"

There's a response to the reading that looks like kindness and isn't quite. Once you've concluded that the mood is about you, you set about repairing it. You're warmer than usual at dinner. You make the tea. You apologise for the bins, or for the plan, or for nothing in particular. You send a follow-up email to the manager with more detail than anyone asked for. The evening becomes a campaign to put right a thing that, on the evidence of this book, mostly didn't happen.

Look at it from the other side of the table. Your partner came home tired and quiet. Now the person opposite them is being unusually attentive, apologising for things they don't remember, watching their face for signs of thaw. From the inside of a bad day, that's confusing, and it asks something. It asks them to respond to a repair for an offence they haven't registered, and the easiest way to respond is to reassure, and now the tired person is doing the reassurance job from chapter 18 at the end of a day that already took everything.

The repair also confirms nothing. If your partner softens over the evening, the reading says the repair worked, when what happened was that the bad day wore off, as bad days do, on their own clock. If they don't soften, the reading says the offence was worse than you thought. Either way the reading comes out of the evening stronger, and you come out of it having spent the evening managing a mood that was never yours to manage.

There's a version of this that's an apology for nothing, and it's common enough to have a book of its own later in this series. Here I'd only say that "sorry" for a thing you didn't do teaches the people around you that your apologies are a way of checking the weather rather than a response to a fault, and that's a costly thing to teach them, because the apologies you mean will be heard the same way.

The alternative is the check. "Rough day?" does in one sentence what the campaign does in an evening, and it does it by asking about them rather than by managing them. If the answer is that it was about you, chapter 24 is about what to do, and it's a conversation about a thing and not a campaign of warmth. If it wasn't, the repair was never needed, and the evening is yours.

What the reading costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill.

The evenings. Four hours on a two-line email. An evening on a quiet dinner. An hour on a cheerful reply. Over a year that's weeks, spent inside a guess.

The anxiety. A person who lives at the centre of everyone else's behaviour lives in a world where every mood is a possible verdict on them, and that's a frightening world to live in, and the fear doesn't switch off when the reading turns out to be wrong, because there's another mood tomorrow.

The relationship. Downey and Feldman's rejection-sensitive people and their partners were both less satisfied, and the researchers traced part of that to what the reading produced, the jealousy, the hostility, the reduced support. A partner who's met the cool, hurt version of you a hundred times, on evenings when they were only tired, has a hundred data points about what it's like to be tired near you.

The work. Thursday's meeting arrives with a version of you in it that's been rehearsing a defence for two days. The manager, who'd meant a normal catch-up, meets a person braced for a verdict, and wonders what's wrong.

The friendships. The friend who took a day to reply, and got, in return, a slightly cooler you for a week, without knowing why.

The version of them you build. Every reading that goes unchecked becomes part of your picture of the other person. Your manager, in your picture, is someone who withholds and disapproves. Your partner is someone who punishes with silence. Neither picture is drawn from anything they did. Both are drawn from readings, and you'll act toward the picture, and they'll feel it, and it'll come back to you as coolness, and you'll read that too.

The sleep, on the nights the reading arrives late. A message at ten, read as cool, is a message that's still being read at one, and the morning after is spent tired as well as wary. And the body's cost of living braced, which is the cost of any habit that treats ordinary days as threatening, and which shows up as a tension that's hard to locate because it isn't about anything in particular. It's about everyone.

And the plain cost of being wrong, over and over, about the people you know best, and never finding out, because the evening ends and the next day they're fine.

What it does to them

The reading is silent, and it feels as though it costs no one but you. It doesn't.

Living with someone who takes moods personally means learning to manage your moods around them. Not to be tired at dinner, because tiredness will be read. Not to send a short reply, because short will be read. To perform a warmth you don't have at the end of a bad day, because the alternative is a second conversation about why you're quiet, and you haven't got one in you. Over time the person you live with becomes, near you, less tired than they are, less short than they are, less themselves than they are, and they carry the bad day somewhere else, or nowhere.

There's the reassurance job. A partner who knows that quiet gets read learns to pre-empt it. "Bad day, nothing to do with you." It's a kind thing to say and after a few years it's a tax, paid at the door every evening, and the person paying it has started to feel that their bad days are yours to be managed.

There's what a child learns. A child who watches a parent take every mood personally learns that moods are aimed, and grows up reading the world that way, and the reading is inherited the way most habits are, by being watched at a kitchen table.

There's the friend who learns to reply fast, not because they want to but because a slow reply produces a cool week, and the friendship becomes a thing to be maintained rather than enjoyed.

And there's what the reading does to their bad day. A person who comes home with a rough afternoon and finds that the rough afternoon has been read as an attack now has two things to deal with. The afternoon, and you. The one place they could have put the day down has become the place where the day gets turned into a question about them, and they'll stop putting it down there.

None of this is what you intend. You intend to notice and to care. But the reading, unchecked, arrives on the other side as surveillance, and people who feel watched behave like people who feel watched, which is carefully, and carefully isn't close.

The other account

The next three chapters are the method. This one is the habit that does most of the work, and it takes about a minute.

Write the reading down. When you notice you've taken something personally, put the reading in a sentence on paper or in your phone. "The email was short because the report was poor." "They're quiet because of the bins." Writing it down turns it from a fact about the world into a sentence you wrote, which is what it is.

Write the other account next to it. One explanation that has nothing to do with you, as specific as the reading. Not "maybe it's nothing", which is too vague to compete. Something with a day in it. "The email was short because they had back-to-back meetings and replied on their phone." "They're quiet because the call at eleven went badly." Make it as concrete as the reading, because the reading is concrete and a vague alternative loses to it every time.

Make it about their day, not your virtue. The other account isn't "I'm a good person so it can't be me". It's "here is a plausible day that produces this behaviour". Story and Repetti's finding is the template. A bad interaction at work produces anger and withdrawal at home the same evening. Start from there and fill in the details you'd expect from what you know of their week.

Notice which one you can check. Both are guesses. Only one of them has been treated as a fact for the last hour. Putting them side by side doesn't tell you which is true. It tells you that there are two, and that you'd chosen without looking.

Do it every time for a fortnight. The list from chapter 1 becomes two columns. By the second week, the other account starts arriving on its own, before the pen, and that's the habit forming. After a month, most people find the reading still arrives first, because it always will, and the other account arrives about a second later, which is soon enough to stop the evening.

Add the third column when you find out. Where you learn what the mood was actually about, write it down. This column is the evidence, over months, of which of your two guesses tends to be right, and I'd expect it to be lopsided in a direction that ends the argument.

The check

Sometimes the other account isn't enough, because it matters. Thursday matters. The dinner matters. You need to know, and there's one way to know, and it takes one sentence.

Make it about them. "You seem quiet tonight. Rough day?" "Was that a heavy one at work?" "Is Thursday a normal catch-up, or is there something on the report you want me to look at first?" The question points at their day and offers them a way to tell you about it. It doesn't point at your standing.

Keep it to one sentence. Not a preamble about how you'd noticed and didn't want to intrude and hoped it wasn't about you. That's the reading, spoken aloud, and it puts the other person in charge of your feelings about their mood. One sentence, plain, and then quiet.

Ask once. If the answer is "I'm fine, just tired", that's the answer. Don't ask again in ten minutes. Don't ask in a different form. A second ask is the reassurance seeking that chapter 13 warned about, and it teaches them that "fine" won't be accepted, which teaches them to perform.

Accept the answer. This is the hard part. The reading will want to hear the answer as a cover. "They said fine but they don't mean it." That's the reading refusing to lose, and it can't be argued with, because it treats every answer as further evidence. The rule is that

the check settles it. If it was about you, most people will tell you when asked kindly and directly, and chapter 24 is for that. If they say it wasn't, it wasn't, and the evening is over.

Know when to ask. The check is for things that matter and for people you're close to. Not for the neighbour who didn't wave, who is chapter 21. Not for the friend's slightly-too-cheerful reply, which isn't a thing. Ask when you'd act differently depending on the answer, and leave it when you wouldn't.

Ask in the moment where you can. At dinner, at the door, in a two-line reply to the two-line email. "Thanks, see you Thursday. Anything I should prepare?" The check that happens on the day costs a sentence. The check that happens on Thursday after two days of the evening costs two days.

Leaving it

Most readings can't be checked and don't need to be. The neighbour who didn't wave. The stranger's look. The colleague on another floor who seemed short in the corridor. For those, the method is to leave it, and leaving it is a skill.

Say the sentence. "Probably their day." Not as a mantra, as a plain probability. Chapter 5 is the reason it's probably true. Most behaviour is produced by the situation the person is in, and you can't see the situation, and the one you can see, which is you, is the least likely candidate for a stranger's face.

Put it down where you found it. The neighbour didn't wave at ten past six on the pavement. That's where it stays. It doesn't come in the house. The test of whether you've left it is whether it's still there at dinner, and if it is, write the two columns and then leave it.

Take the evening back. What you'd have done with the evening if the reading hadn't arrived, do that. The reading gets its power from the hours you give it, and the hours were yours.

Notice what leaving isn't. It isn't deciding they were wrong to be short. It isn't deciding you were right to be hurt. It isn't a conclusion at all. It's declining to draw one, on the grounds that you haven't got the information and can't get it and don't need it. That's not avoidance. It's accuracy about what you know, which is that a person made a face on a pavement.

Practise on strangers first. The neighbour and the stranger are the easiest readings to leave, because there's nothing to check and nothing at stake, and a fortnight of leaving those builds the skill for the ones that matter. Every look on a pavement that stays on the pavement is a rehearsal for the quiet at dinner.

Expect it to feel like negligence. For a fortnight, leaving a reading unchecked will feel like leaving a tap running. That's the reading's claim to be insurance, and chapter 8 is about why it isn't. The feeling passes when the third column on your list starts filling up with "nothing to do with me" and you begin to believe your own evidence.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to be one sentence.

When I take something personally, I write the other account before I believe mine, and if it matters, I ask.

Three parts.

The first is the notice. You've taken something personally. You'll know, because there's a reading with you in it and an evening starting. Catch that.

The second is the other account. One sentence, as specific as the reading, with their day in it, before you do anything else.

The third is the fork. If it matters and you're close, the check, once, about them, and accept the answer. If it doesn't matter or you can't ask, leave it, and take the evening back.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When I read an email or a message as being about me, I'll write one other account for it before I reply or reread it.

When someone I live with is quiet, I'll ask one question about their day and accept the answer.

When a stranger or an acquaintance seems short with me, I'll say "probably their day" and leave it where it happened.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. For the first week, the reading will arrive exactly as fast as it always has, and you'll write the other account afterwards, grudgingly, and the other account will feel like a story you're telling yourself to feel better. In the second week you'll check something, and the answer will be about their day, and you'll notice that it was exactly the account you'd written, and that will be the first time the method proves itself. Around the third week the other account will start turning up on its own, a second or two behind the reading, and the evenings will start to shorten. By a month, you'll have a list with a third column, and the third column will be mostly "not about me", and you'll have begun to trust it over the reading. You'll still take things personally. Everyone does. But it'll be a thing that happens and gets checked, rather than a thing that happens and gets the evening.

Partners, managers, friends who go quiet, strangers and when it's more than a habit

The rule holds everywhere. A few situations need their own paragraph.

Partners. This is where the reading runs most and where the check is easiest and least used. The person at the dinner table is the person most likely to tell you the truth when asked once, kindly. "Rough day?" at the door, before the reading has had time to settle in, saves most evenings. And the sample argument in chapter 14 applies most strongly here. You are the safe one, and the safe one gets the weather.

Managers. The two-line email is the modern form of the reading, and it's read by everyone who gets one. Managers send short emails because they send a lot of emails. If Thursday matters, the check is one line in the reply, about the meeting and not about your standing. And if a manager really is unhappy with your work, they'll tell you, because that's their job, and the reading can't bring Thursday forward.

Friends who go quiet. People's lives fill up. A friend who's slow to reply for a month is usually a friend with a month in it, and the other account is "something's happening for them" rather than "something's happened between us". The check here is a message about them. "Haven't heard from you in a bit, everything all right?" If it's about you, they'll say. Mostly it's a month.

Strangers. Leave it. Always. There's no day behind a stranger's face that you'll ever learn, and there's no check available, and nothing you did could have reached them. The neighbour who didn't wave was looking at their phone.

Children and teenagers. A teenager's mood is not about you in the ordinary run of things, and reading it as though it is teaches them that their weather is a problem for the household. Notice, offer, and leave it. If they want to tell you, they'll tell you when the noticing has been quiet enough to feel safe.

When it's more than a habit. If the sense of being watched and judged is with you in every social situation, if you dread meetings and parties for days in advance and go over them for days after, if you avoid things because of it, that's the pattern the NHS describes as social anxiety, and the NHS says it's common and treatable and doesn't tend to go away on its own. See a GP, or refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. The method here may help alongside, but it isn't the treatment. Likewise if the reading has been with you your whole life, in every relationship, and the fear of rejection shapes who you get close to, Downey and Feldman's work suggests it's a pattern worth taking to a therapist rather than a book.

When it is aimed at you. If the moods in your house are aimed, with contempt in them, and you find yourself frightened of the person you live with, this book has nothing to say to that except that it isn't a reading. Trust it. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is on 0808 2000 247.

When it was about you

Sometimes the check comes back the other way. "Actually, yes. I was annoyed about the plan." The report did have a problem. The friend had been hurt by something you said. The reading was right.

Good. That's the check working. You've found out, in one sentence, what would otherwise have taken an evening and a week of coolness to not find out. Now you have something real, and the method for something real is a conversation, not a verdict.

Notice what you've been given. Not a judgement on you. A piece of information about a specific thing, the plan, the report, the remark, that can be talked about and usually put right. "I'm sorry, I should have asked before I changed it." "What was wrong with the report?" "I didn't realise that landed badly. Tell me." Those are the responses of a person who's found out, and they're the responses that fix things, and they're available to you only because you asked instead of reading.

Now the important part. One right reading isn't evidence for the next one. The reading is right sometimes, and the search for the offence finds one every time, and the fact that it was right on Tuesday tells you nothing about Thursday. Fenigstein's students who guessed the singled-out paper was theirs were sometimes right too. Being right once is what keeps the habit alive, because it's remembered, and the dozen times it was wrong weren't,

because you never found out. Keep the third column. The right readings go in it, and so do the wrong ones, and the proportion is what matters.

Notice, too, how the confirmation arrived. Not from the evening. The evening would have told you it was about the report when it was about the plan, or about the plan when it was about a remark you'd forgotten. The check told you the actual thing, and the actual thing is always smaller and more specific than the reading, because the reading is made of your fears and the thing is made of their day.

And when the check confirms that someone is unhappy with you, that is not the same as being told that you're a bad person or that the relationship is in trouble. It's being told about a plan. Downey and Feldman's rejection-sensitive participants reacted to ordinary insensitivities as if they were rejection, and that's the thing to watch for in yourself when the check comes back yes. It was about you. It was about one thing. The one thing can be addressed. That's all it was.

When you've spent the evening on it again

It'll happen. A message will land at nine at night and you'll be three hours into the reading before you remember there's a method. Or you'll do the other account and not believe a word of it and go on with the evening anyway. Then the thought will come that the habit is stronger than the book.

It isn't. It's faster, which is different. The reading has had a lifetime of practice and the other account has had a month, and speed is what practice gives. What happened is that the reading got in first and stayed, and you noticed at midnight rather than at nine. Noticing at midnight is still noticing, and last year you'd have noticed on Thursday.

Write the other account late. It works at midnight. It works the next morning. Put the reading down in a sentence and the other account beside it and look at the two, and the evening you've already spent is spent, but tomorrow isn't.

Work out which reading got through. Was it a message at night, when you were tired and the reading runs fastest? Then messages after nine get read in the morning. Was it a person you always read? Then that person gets the check at the door before anything else. Was it a topic, work or your body or money, that's always about you? Then that topic gets the other account written in advance, because you know it's coming.

And be fair to yourself about the size of it. An evening spent on a reading is an evening, not a relapse into a life. Last year it was most evenings. This month it was one. The habit hasn't come back. It came round once, which habits do, and it found a person who noticed it, which is not the person it used to find.

No streaks. Don't count evenings without a reading. The reading will come every day for a long time, because it's how the mind is built, and a streak turns a normal Tuesday into a failure. Count checks made and accounts written, and let one long evening be one line in a list that's mostly shorter.

The short email, again

At ten past two your manager replies to the report. Two lines. "Thanks. Let's discuss Thursday." You read it once. The reading arrives, as it always will, and it says the report is a problem. Then, a second behind it, the other account arrives, because it's been arriving for a month now. They've got meetings back to back on Tuesdays and they reply on their phone between them. You write back. "Great, see you Thursday. Anything I should have ready?" The reply comes at four. "No, just the usual catch-up. Nice work on the north section." The afternoon is yours.

At dinner your partner is quiet. You notice, which you've always done, and then you ask. "Rough one?" They put their fork down and tell you about a call at eleven with someone who was impossible, and the telling takes ten minutes, and at the end of it they're a bit less quiet, and the bins never come up because they were never there.

A friend takes a day to reply to a message. You notice that too, and you write "probably a busy week" on the list, and you don't have a view on how cheerful the reply is when it comes. The neighbour at number four looks straight at you and doesn't wave. You say "probably their day" under your breath and go inside, and it stays on the pavement.

The list in your phone has three columns now, and the third one, the one for what it turned out to be, has a month in it. Not about me. Not about me. A meeting that ran over. A cold. Not about me. About me, once, and it was the plan, and you talked about it and

sorted it in five minutes. You've stopped adding to the list most days because there's less to add, and the evenings have got longer in the sense that they belong to you.

Your partner said something last week that stayed with you. They said you'd got easier to be tired around. They didn't mean it as a compliment, exactly. It was just an observation, made at the door on a Thursday with a bad day behind it, and they told you about the bad day without checking your face first, and you noticed that too.

None of this is a transformation. You took something personally on Wednesday and spent an hour on it before you caught yourself. The reading still arrives first and always will. But it arrives now as a guess with a rival, and the rival is usually right, and you know it, because you've kept count.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Next time you take something personally, write one sentence about their day that has nothing to do with you, and if it matters, ask them one question about it. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a GP or a therapist who knows you. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, 16, 19, 20, 21, 25 and 26. The manager, the two-line email, the partner, the friend and the neighbour at number four are invented.

Before you start. The NHS page "Social anxiety (social phobia)", for the description of the condition, the advice to see a GP and the self-referral route. The domestic abuse helpline number is from the NHS pages on getting help.

Chapter 3. Fenigstein, "Self-consciousness and the overperception of self as a target", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47, 1984, pages 860 to 870. Three studies with 233 students. The account of position as the reason for the bias is mine.

Chapter 4. Epley, Keysar, Van Boven and Gilovich, "Perspective taking as egocentric anchoring and adjustment", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, 2004, pages 327 to 339. Five

studies. Gilovich, Savitsky and Medvec, "The illusion of transparency: biased assessments of others' ability to read one's emotional states", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 1998, pages 332 to 346, used in several earlier books in this series and mentioned here in passing. The claim that the reading is your own state adjusted a little is my reading of Epley's findings.

Chapter 5. Gilbert and Malone, "The correspondence bias", *Psychological Bulletin* 117, 1995, pages 21 to 38. A review. Story and Repetti, "Daily occupational stressors and marital behavior", *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, 2006, pages 690 to 700. Forty-three couples over five days, which the chapter says is small.

Chapter 6. Fenigstein as above. The account of the search finding the offence backwards is mine.

Chapter 7. Fenigstein as above, for the group study. The claim that a braced face changes a room is mine.

Chapter 8. Downey and Feldman, "Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, 1996, pages 1327 to 1343. Four studies. The chapter's contrast between the reading and insurance is mine.

Chapter 12. Kross, Ayduk and Mischel, "When asking 'why' does not hurt: distinguishing rumination from reflective processing of negative emotions", *Psychological Science* 16, 2005, pages 709 to 715, as verified for an earlier book in this series, *It's already over*, which covers going over things at length. The claim that no new information arrives during the evening is mine.

Chapter 13. Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich, "Do others judge us as harshly as we think? Overestimating the impact of our failures on others' judgments", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 81, 2001, pages 44 to 56, as verified for an earlier book in this series. The distinction between the check and reassurance seeking is mine.

Chapter 14. Story and Repetti as above, for the bad day arriving at home. The sample argument is mine.

Chapter 15. Downey and Feldman as above, for intentional rejection perceived in ambiguous behaviour. The effort test for intent is mine.

Chapter 17. Downey and Feldman as above, for the dissatisfaction and its mechanisms. The rest is mine.

Chapter 18. Everything in the chapter is my reasoning.

Chapter 22. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 23. The NHS page "Social anxiety (social phobia)" as above. Downey and Feldman as above. The helpline as above. The earlier book on expecting others to read your needs is They can't read your mind.

Chapter 24. Fenigstein and Downey and Feldman as above. The rest is mine.