

They can't read your mind

A short book about expecting the people close to you to
know what you need without being told

unbry · Free to read, yours to keep

<https://unbry.com/read/they-cant-read-your-mind>

First edition

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

Contents

1. Before you start
2. Sunday, ten to eight
3. Why saying nothing seems sensible
4. "If they loved me, they'd know"
5. "It's obvious how I feel"
6. "I did tell them"
7. "After all these years, they should know me"
8. "Other people's partners just know"
9. "I always know what they need"
10. "If I have to ask, it doesn't count"
11. "I don't want to be needy"
12. "I shouldn't have to ask for that"
13. What happens when they fail the test
14. Friends, parents and the people you work for
15. What the habit costs
16. Working out what you need
17. The plain ask
18. Asking them, too
19. The decision
20. Forgetting, refusals and times you can't find the words
21. Sunday again

22. Notes

Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You need something from someone close to you. It might be help, or comfort, or some time, or for them to notice that you've had a bad week. You don't say so. You wait for them to see it. They don't, and you're hurt, because it seems to you that if they cared they'd have known. You're more hurt by their not knowing than you would have been by going without the thing itself.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that saying nothing makes sense from the inside. Being understood without having to explain is one of the great pleasures of being close to someone, and asking can feel like admitting it's gone. The second is that the expectation can't be met. What you feel is far less visible than it seems to you. Hints are far less clear than they seem to the person dropping them. Years together make people more confident that they know each other and don't make them much more accurate. So when you wait to see whether someone notices, you aren't testing their love. You're testing whether they can read minds, and nobody can. The third is practical. When you need something, you say what it is in one plain sentence, and you judge the person by what they do next. Chapters 15 to 18 cover how.

This book doesn't say your needs are unreasonable or that the people around you are doing enough. They may not be. It says that you can't find out until they've been told.

Three cautions.

If you're afraid of how your partner will react when you say what you need, this isn't the book for that. I mean afraid of their anger, their contempt, or what they might do. The NHS page on domestic abuse asks two questions. Have you ever felt afraid of your partner? Have you ever changed your behaviour because you're afraid of what your partner might do? If the answer to either is yes, the freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline is open day and night on 0808 2000 247.

If you've stopped telling anyone what you need because you feel you don't deserve anything, or because nothing seems worth asking for, and your mood has been low for a couple of weeks or more, that may be depression. The first step is a GP.

And this book is about ordinary relationships between people of good will. If you've told someone plainly and repeatedly what you need and they've ignored it, you don't have this habit. You have a different problem, and chapter 19 touches on it.

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.

Sunday, ten to eight

It's ten to eight on a Sunday evening. You're wiping down the kitchen worktops, harder than they need. It's been a bad week. There was the business with your manager on Tuesday, your mother's hospital appointment on Thursday, and two nights of poor sleep. You've been flat since lunch.

Your partner is in the next room with the laptop, doing the online shop. At about four o'clock they asked, "You all right?" and you said, "Fine." They said "OK" and went back to what they were doing.

What you wanted, and still want, is fairly simple. You wanted them to see that you weren't fine, and to put the laptop down and ask what was wrong in a way that showed they meant it. Then you wanted them to say, "I'll do the kids' bedtime, you go and have a bath."

None of that has happened. So you've done the bedtime, and now you're doing the kitchen, and the cupboard doors are closing a little louder than usual. Each one is a message. You're aware of this, and slightly ashamed of it, and you close the next one loudly anyway.

At half past nine they come in and say, "Shall we watch something?" You say, "I'm going to bed." They say, "Oh. OK. Night, then." You lie awake with a sentence going round in your head. You think that they never notice, and that you shouldn't have to tell them.

In the other room, your partner is puzzled and a little uneasy. They know something's off. They asked, and were told you were fine. They've run through what they might have done and come up with nothing. They assume it's work, and that you'll talk about it when you want to.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The need** is what you want from the other person, whether or not you've put it into words even for yourself. **A signal** is anything you do to show the need without stating it. It might be a sigh, a silence, a slammed cupboard, a "fine", or a remark about how tired you are. **The test** is what the waiting amounts to. It's an examination the other person doesn't know they're sitting, and they pass it only by guessing. **The verdict** is what you conclude when they fail, which is usually that they don't care enough. And **a plain ask** is one sentence that says what you'd like and when.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

The need is real and usually modest. You're not wishing for the moon. You wanted a bath and someone to ask twice.

You signal and you don't say. The signals feel loud and clear to you.

Asked directly, you deny it. "Fine" is the commonest word in this habit.

The hurt is about the not noticing. By half past nine, the bath hardly matters. What matters is what their failure to offer it seems to say about how they feel.

And the other person mostly has no idea. Either they've noticed nothing, or they've noticed a mood and can't tell where it came from.

Try one thing before reading on. Think of the last three times you felt let down by someone close. For each, write down what you needed, in a sentence. Then write down what you said to them about it beforehand, word for word if you can. If you told them plainly and they didn't do it, that's a different problem from the one in this book. If what you said was "fine", or nothing, read on.

Why saying nothing seems sensible

I don't want to start by telling you to communicate better. You've heard that, and it misses what's at stake. The wish to be understood without speaking isn't silly. There are good reasons for it.

Being known is one of the best things about closeness. You've had a friend hand you a cup of tea at the right moment, and a partner who could tell from the way you put your keys down how the day had gone. Those moments feel like proof that you matter to someone, more than any declaration could. Wanting more of them is natural.

It used to happen more. Early in a relationship people watch each other closely. They notice moods, remember small preferences, and ask twice. You remember being read that way, and you may remember reading them. So the expectation isn't invented. It's based on a time when it was partly met.

Asking feels like a loss. If you have to say "I've had a rotten week, could you do bedtime," it can feel as though the offer is worth less when it comes. You wanted it to come from them. Chapter 9 takes this seriously, because I think it's what holds the whole habit together.

Asking is exposing. Stating a need means admitting that you have one, and risking a no. If you signal instead, you've risked nothing. Should they fail to notice, you can tell yourself you never asked.

You may not want to be a burden or a nag. You may have grown up in a house where asking for things was frowned on, or where one parent's needs took up all the room. Many people come out of that determined never to be demanding.

And sometimes you don't know what you need. You feel wretched, and you couldn't say what would help. Part of the hope is that the other person will work it out for you.

I think the silence is trying to meet four needs, and this list is mine. You want to feel known. You want care that's freely given. You want to avoid the risk of asking and being refused. And you don't want to be someone who makes demands.

All four are reasonable. My argument is that the habit serves them badly. You end up feeling unknown. The care you wanted doesn't come, because the other person doesn't know it's wanted. You avoid the risk of being refused, but the verdict you reach hurts more than a refusal would have. And in the end you come across as demanding anyway, in ways that are harder to live with than a plain request. The other person gets moods they can't explain and cupboard doors closed hard. They also seem to be failing a standard that nobody has told them about.

"If they loved me, they'd know"

This sentence is the centre of the habit, and you may never have said it aloud. It connects two things. One is how much someone cares about you. The other is how accurately they can tell what's going on inside you without being told. The belief is that the first produces the second. Love should make a person perceptive. So if they fail to perceive, it means they don't love you enough.

Therapists who work with couples have recognised this belief for a long time. In the early 1980s Eidelson and Epstein built a questionnaire to measure beliefs that cause trouble in relationships, and one of its five parts was the expectation that partners should be able to read each other's minds. Researchers have used it ever since. Courtney Wright and Michael Roloff, summing up that body of work in 2015, say that people who hold mind reading expectations often have less satisfying relationships. Their own study is described in chapter 12.

That's an association, and it could run either way. Perhaps unhappy couples come to expect mind reading because they've stopped talking. But consider the logic of the belief, because I think it fails before any data come into it.

Caring about someone and knowing what they're thinking are different abilities. The first is a matter of what you want for them. The second is a matter of information. Your partner can want your happiness with their whole heart and still not know that Tuesday's meeting is still eating at you on Sunday, because nothing visible

has told them. The most devoted parent can't tell why a baby is crying and has to work through the possibilities. Nobody concludes from this that the parent doesn't love the baby.

Turn it round, and think of someone you love. Could you say, right now, what they most need from you this week? You may have a guess. Chapter 8 will look at how good such guesses tend to be. If you're not certain, that doesn't mean your love is deficient. It means you're not inside their head.

So the link doesn't hold. Someone who loves you will want to know what you need, and will generally act on it once they do. That doesn't give them any way of finding it out unless you tell them.

There's something kinder to notice here as well. If the verdict is wrong, and their not knowing doesn't mean they don't care, then a good many evenings like Sunday have been spent grieving over something that hadn't happened. They did care. They were in the next room, puzzled, doing the online shop.

"It's obvious how I feel"

On Sunday you felt as though your state was written all over you. You were quiet at lunch. Your shoulders were up. Your "fine" had an edge on it that you could hear yourself. It seems impossible that someone who's lived with you for eleven years could look at all that and see nothing.

Thomas Gilovich, Kenneth Savitsky and Victoria Husted Medvec have a name for this impression. They call it the illusion of transparency, and they define it as a tendency for people to overestimate how far others can make out their internal states. In their experiments, people who were lying thought their lies were easier to spot than they were. People who were tasting something foul while keeping a straight face thought their disgust showed more than it did. In each case the feeling was strong inside the person, and it seemed to them that it must be leaking out. Observers saw much less.

Their explanation is worth having. When you try to judge how you look to someone else, you start from how you feel and adjust from there. You know you feel dreadful, so you start from there. But you don't adjust far enough, because your own feelings are so vivid to you. The other person has no access to that starting point. All they have is your face and your voice, and those show much less of your feelings than you'd think.

Set that beside what your partner actually had on Sunday. They saw a person who was a bit quiet at lunch. People are quiet at lunch for many reasons, including tiredness, a headache, thinking about

work, or nothing at all. They heard "fine". They saw you clean the kitchen, which you do most Sundays. From inside, you were sending a signal at full volume. From outside, it was a fairly ordinary Sunday with a slightly subdued spouse.

There's a related finding about people who fear rejection, and it applies to anyone who finds asking hard. Jacquie Vorauer and colleagues studied people making overtures of romantic interest. People who were anxious about being rejected believed their cautious overtures conveyed much more interest than they did. The researchers called it a signal amplification bias. The person knew how much it had cost them to make even a small move. They assumed the other person would take that into account and read the small move as a large one. The other person couldn't know about the cost, and saw only the small move.

I think the same thing happens with signals of need. You know what it cost you to let your voice drop on the word "fine". To you, that was nearly a confession. To the person who heard it, it was the word "fine".

"I did tell them"

Sometimes you feel you did say it. On Friday you mentioned what a week it had been. On Saturday you said you were shattered. On Sunday morning you remarked that it would be nice to have a bath in peace for once. As far as you're concerned the message was delivered three times, and there's no excuse for not having got it.

Read those sentences again as the other person heard them. "What a week" is an observation. "I'm shattered" is a report. "It'd be nice to have a bath in peace for once" is a wish addressed to nobody in particular, and the words "for once" carry a faint complaint. None of them says "I'd like you to do the children's bedtime tonight so that I can have a bath." You know that's what they meant, because you know what you were thinking when you said them. The listener only has the words.

Boaz Keysar and Anne Henly tested how well speakers can judge this. They had people say ambiguous sentences aloud to a listener while trying to get across one particular meaning. Afterwards the speakers estimated how often the listener had understood. They consistently overestimated. They expected to be understood more often than they were. The researchers also had a third person listen in, someone who'd been told what the speaker meant. These overhearers didn't overestimate in the same way. So the error was particular to the speaker, who couldn't hear their own sentence as ambiguous because they knew what they meant by it.

A hint is an ambiguous sentence said on purpose. It's built so that it can be taken as a request or as a passing remark. It's useful to you because it can be denied, since if they don't respond you haven't really asked. The trouble is that a sentence that can be taken as a passing remark usually will be, by someone who's doing the online shop.

Here are some common ones, with what the speaker means. These are my own examples. "Don't worry about my birthday" means "I'd like you to make a fuss of my birthday." "I suppose I'll do it, then" means "I want you to offer." "It's fine, go out with your friends" means "I'd like you to stay in, or at least to check that it really is fine." "Have you seen the state of the garden?" means "Please mow the lawn." In every case the listener has two reasonable choices. They can take the words at face value, or they can guess that you mean something else and risk being told they're imagining things. Most people, most of the time, take the words at face value, and it isn't laziness on their part. Taking people at their word is a form of respect.

Signals sent by message fare even worse. Kruger and colleagues ran five experiments on tone in email. People writing messages were confident that their tone, whether joking or serious, would come across. The people reading them did much worse at telling which was which than the writers expected. The writers could hear the tone in their heads as they typed, and couldn't imagine the words without it. So a text that says "No, it's fine, have a good time" will be read as permission. The sender may hear the hurt in it, but the person reading it can't.

So I'd ask you to be strict with yourself about this. You can only say you told them if a stranger reading a transcript would know what you wanted.

"After all these years, they should know me"

A new partner might be forgiven for not knowing. But this is someone who's shared your bed, your bank account and your bad habits for a decade or more. They've seen you through a bereavement and two house moves. Surely by now they've learned to read you.

They've learned a lot. They know how you take your tea, which of your relatives you can't stand, and what you'll order in an Indian restaurant. They know most of the stable facts about you. What you need on a particular Sunday evening isn't that kind of fact. It depends on the week you've had, the mood you're in, and what you happen to want right now. What they learned in 2015 doesn't tell them that.

There's research on whether time together makes people better at knowing each other, and the answer is awkward. Swann and Gill studied dating couples, and separately followed room-mates over time. They measured how accurately each person could describe the other's history, preferences and views. They also measured how confident each was in those descriptions. The longer and closer the relationship, the more confident people were. They weren't consistently more accurate. People knew more about each other as time passed, in the sense of having a richer picture, and the richer picture made them surer. It didn't make them right more often.

That works against you in two ways. Your partner is confident they can read you, so when you say "fine" and seem roughly fine, they don't probe. You're confident they can read you too, so you don't see any need to spell it out. You're both relying on a skill that neither of you has.

Kenneth Savitsky, Boaz Keysar and colleagues found something that points the same way. They called it the closeness-communication bias, and the rest of their paper's title states the finding, which is "increased egocentrism among friends versus strangers". As that indicates, people were more likely to assume they'd been understood when they were talking to someone close than when they were talking to a stranger. With a stranger, you know you have to explain yourself. With a spouse you assume you don't, so you explain less, and you're understood less well than you think.

People also change. The person your partner learned to read ten years ago wanted different things. You may once have wanted to be left alone when upset, and now want company. You may never have said so. They're still applying the old rule, in good faith, and you take that as indifference.

Spending years with someone gives you affection and shared history and a good deal of knowledge about them. It doesn't let either of you see what the other is thinking. You're entitled to everything long acquaintance really provides. It was never going to provide that.

"Other people's partners just know"

You've seen it at dinner parties. Your friend reaches for her glass and her husband has already filled it. He starts a sentence and she finishes it. She mentions that she's tired, and he says they should get going. You drive home in silence, thinking that some couples have this and you two don't.

I'd question the comparison before you draw that conclusion. What follows is my own reasoning.

You saw the result and you didn't see the process. You were there for three hours of a relationship that's run for twenty years. You saw him fill her glass. You didn't see the conversation in 2009 in which she said, "When we're out, I feel looked after if you notice my glass is empty." You didn't see the argument that came before it. When a couple seem able to read each other's minds, it's usually because they've told each other a great deal over the years. It looks like telepathy from outside because the telling happened in private.

You also saw a small sample, and one chosen to look good. People are attentive to each other in company. You didn't see the Sunday evenings. For all you know, she went home and closed a few cupboard doors hard.

You're comparing what you know from inside your own relationship with what you can see of theirs from outside. You know every missed signal in your own relationship, because you were the one sending them. In theirs you can see only the

successes. If they were watching you two at the same dinner, they might well have seen a couple who pass each other the salt without asking and laugh at the same moments, and gone home thinking the same about you.

Films and novels have a lot to do with this too. The romantic ideal in most stories is a lover who understands without being told. They turn up at the right moment, and they know what the silence means. It's moving, and it's written by a scriptwriter who knows what both characters are thinking. Real people don't have a scriptwriter. A partner in a film who asked, "What would help right now?" would seem unromantic. In real life I'd call that person a very good partner.

There's a practical use for the comparison, though. If you know a couple who do seem to look after each other well, ask one of them how. I'd expect the answer to be mostly about talking. They'll say that they tell each other things, or that he asks, or that they sorted that out years ago after a terrible row. I doubt anyone will tell you they've never had to say anything.

"I always know what they need"

Part of the grievance is a comparison. You notice when they're down. You remember their mother's birthday. You can tell when work is getting to them, and you make the tea or take the children out. If you can do it for them, it seems fair to ask why they can't do it for you.

Some people are more attentive than others, and you may well be the more attentive one in your household. I don't doubt it. But it's worth testing how accurate the attentiveness is, because there's good evidence that people are worse at this than they believe, including with spouses.

Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel and Nicholas Epley ran twenty-five experiments on the question. They were testing the common advice to put yourself in the other person's shoes. People were asked to predict what another person was feeling or thinking, or what they'd prefer. Some were first told to take the other's perspective and imagine the world as they saw it. Some of the experiments involved spouses predicting each other's preferences.

Beforehand, a large majority of people believed that taking the other's perspective would make them more accurate. It didn't. If anything it made them slightly less accurate, while sometimes making them more confident. Only one thing in the whole series improved accuracy, and it was in the final experiment. People were allowed to ask the other person, in conversation, and then they got

it right more often. The authors' summary is that understanding another mind requires getting their perspective, and that trying to take it doesn't work.

So when you believe you know what your partner needs, you're doing what they fail to do for you, which is inferring. You may be better at it than they are. You're very unlikely to be as good as you think. There may be things they've wanted from you for years that you've never picked up. You wouldn't know, because nothing tells you when you've missed one. Your partner may have a list of their own, of times you made the tea when they wanted to be left alone, or gave advice when they wanted sympathy.

There's an odd finding from research on gifts that shows how much we prize guessing over asking. Morgan Ward and Susan Broniarczyk studied people buying from a gift registry, which is a list the recipient has made of exactly what they'd like. Close friends were more likely than distant acquaintances to ignore the list and choose something else. They wanted the gift to show how well they knew the person. The recipients were left with presents they hadn't asked for, from the people who cared most. The distant acquaintances bought from the list and gave better-matched gifts.

Both of you are guessing, then, and both of you are overconfident. Each of you privately thinks you're doing the understanding for two. A couple can start asking each other without either of them having failed at anything.

"If I have to ask, it doesn't count"

I think this belief holds all the others in place. Suppose you accept everything so far. They can't see how you feel, hints don't land, and years together don't confer telepathy. You might still say that asking spoils it. If you have to tell them to run you a bath, the bath is only obedience. You wanted it to come from them.

I want to take that seriously, because there's something true in it. An unprompted kindness has a particular sweetness. It tells you that you were in someone's thoughts when you weren't in the room. I'm not going to argue that the sweetness is imaginary. Chapter 17 suggests a way of getting more of it.

But look at what you're valuing when you say it doesn't count. There are two parts to an act of care. One is knowing what's wanted. The other is being willing to do it. The habit puts nearly all the weight on the first. Did they work it out? Yet the knowing is a matter of information, as chapter 3 said, and it has little to do with love. The willing is where the love is.

When you ask, you supply the information yourself and leave the willing entirely to them.

Think about what it means when someone is asked for something and gives it gladly. You say, "I've had an awful week. Could you do bedtime so I can have a bath?" They say, "Of course. Go on, I'll bring you a cup of tea." They've heard you and taken you seriously, and they've put down what they were doing and given you their

evening. I don't see how that can fail to count. It's as clear a demonstration of care as you could wish for. All that's missing is the guess.

There's research on which kinds of support help. Natalya Maisel and Shelly Gable followed sixty-seven couples day by day. Support from a partner was beneficial only when it was responsive, meaning that it fitted what the person actually needed and made them feel understood and cared for. Support that wasn't responsive didn't help. The authors point out that in earlier studies, receiving support from someone close had often gone with feeling worse. For support to be responsive, the supporter has to know the need. The most reliable way for them to know is to be told. So asking makes it more likely that the care you get is the care you wanted.

Consider also what the test measures. When you stay silent and wait, you aren't measuring love, because a loving partner and an indifferent one will both fail to read your mind. You can only tell them apart by asking. One of them says "Of course." The other sighs and says "Can't you do it?" The plain ask shows you which one you've got, and the test can't show you that.

Surprises can survive all this. You can tell someone what you need and still leave them room to meet it in their own way. "I'd love you to make a fuss of my birthday" tells them what's wanted. How they do it can still be a surprise.

"I don't want to be needy"

For many people this is the real obstacle. You'd rather go without than be the sort of person who's always wanting something. You may have known someone like that, a parent or a former partner, and you may have promised yourself you'd never be one.

It's worth being exact about what made that person hard to live with. I doubt it was that they stated what they wanted in a sentence and accepted the answer. People who are felt as needy usually do something else. They want a great deal and want it constantly. They ask in ways that leave no room for refusal, or they don't ask at all and make everyone around them responsible for guessing. They take a no as an injury, and they keep score.

Now look at what the habit produces from the other person's side. They live with moods they can't explain. They're expected to monitor you for signs. When they miss a sign, they're punished with silence. They aren't told what they did wrong, so they can't put it right. They start to feel that whatever they do is likely to be the wrong thing.

That, I'd suggest, is closer to what people mean by needy than a plain request is. The habit doesn't make your needs any smaller. It hands the job of detecting them to somebody else, along with a penalty when they fail. By comparison, a plain ask asks very little of anyone. The other person doesn't have to monitor you or guess or worry. They get a clear piece of information and a free choice.

The same goes for nagging, which people also fear. Nagging is what happens when the need has been signalled and not stated, and is still unmet. It comes out sideways and repeatedly, as complaint. "I suppose I'm doing the bins again." A plain ask, made once, at a sensible moment, is the opposite of that. "Could you take the bins on as your job from now on?" is a proposal, and they can say yes or no to it.

Two things make a request easy to receive, and both are in your hands. The first is that it's specific and has limits. "Could you do bedtime tonight" is easy to say yes to. "I need you to be more supportive" is impossible to say yes to, because nobody knows what it would involve. The second is that a no is allowed. A request the other person can't refuse is really a demand. If they can say, "I can't tonight, I've got this to finish, but I'll do tomorrow and Tuesday," and you can hear that without going cold, then you're simply two adults arranging your lives.

If asking still feels unbearable, it may help to know that the other person will probably be relieved. I can't cite a study for that. My guess is that someone who lives with a partner who goes quiet would give a good deal to be told plainly what's wanted.

"I shouldn't have to ask for that"

There's a version of this objection that deserves more respect than the others, and it usually comes up around housework and children. You're not complaining that they don't read your moods. You're complaining that they don't see the overflowing bin, the empty fridge, the school form that needs signing, or the child who needs new shoes. You see all of it. If you have to ask for each thing, you're still the one doing the noticing and the planning. They've become your assistant, waiting for instructions. "You should have asked" is a maddening reply, and I agree with you about that.

So I won't tell you to ask for each task. It doesn't work, for the reason you've given. It leaves you as the manager of the household with one extra duty, which is delegating.

But silence doesn't work either. Waiting for someone to start seeing what they've never seen, while you get angrier, is the habit in its purest form. They don't see the bin. They may never have had to, because it's always been dealt with before it reached the level at which they'd notice. That may be unfair, and they may be responsible for it, but they still can't see what they can't see.

What's left is to ask once, for something bigger. You ask for whole areas in place of single tasks, and you ask for the noticing along with the doing. "I'd like you to take over everything to do with the school. Forms, trips, parents' evenings, uniform. I won't remind you or check. It's yours." That's one conversation, and you don't then have fifty small ones. It hands over the seeing and the planning as well as the work.

It will go imperfectly at first. A form will be late. If you step in and rescue it, the area comes back to you, so you have to let the form be late.

This is my own suggestion, and I offer it without research behind it. But it fits the argument of the book. The other person can't take a fair share of a load whose size they've never been shown. The honest first step is to show them. Sit down together, list everything that gets done and by whom, and let them look at it. I'd expect the other person to be surprised, more often than not. In most cases they haven't been hiding from the work. They've never seen it written down.

And if you show them, and ask plainly for a fair division, and they decline, then you've learned something important about the relationship. You couldn't have learned it by staying silent.

What happens when they fail the test

Sunday evening followed a course you could have predicted. There was the need, then the signals, then the missed signals, and then the verdict. After that came the part this chapter is about, which is what you did next.

Courtney Wright and Michael Roloff studied this sequence in people who were dating. They measured how strongly each person held mind reading expectations, meaning the belief that a partner should know what you feel without being told. Then they asked about occasions when the partner had upset them and hadn't realised it. People with stronger expectations were more likely to say they'd become combative, or had given their partner the silent treatment. The researchers traced the path. Holding the expectation meant that the partner's failure to notice was itself upsetting, over and above whatever the original problem was. That extra upset led to the fighting or the silence.

You'll recognise the doubling. On Sunday there were two hurts. One was the week you'd had, and the other was that they didn't see it. By half past nine the second was much the larger, and it was the one you took to bed. The first was the kind of thing weeks contain. The second was produced by the test.

Then there's what the silence does at the other end. Your partner knows something is wrong. They don't know what it is. They asked, and were told nothing was wrong. So they're left to guess, and they'll probably guess wrong. Perhaps they'll decide it's about

work, and leave you alone, which is the opposite of what you wanted. Perhaps they'll decide it's about them, and become defensive or anxious.

Perhaps, after enough Sundays like this one, they'll stop asking "You all right?" at all, because the answer is always "Fine" and what follows is always the same. From your side that will look like further proof that they don't notice. In fact it's what the habit has taught them to do.

The silence also destroys information. If you had said at four o'clock, "No, I'm not. It's been a horrible week and I'd love a bath and an early night," your partner would very probably have said, "Go on, then. I'll do the kids." The whole evening would have gone differently. You'd also have learned that they're willing. As it was, you learned nothing true. You went to bed believing they didn't care, and they went to bed believing you were tired. Neither belief was right.

Sometimes the unspoken needs pile up and come out all at once, in a row about something small. "You never think about me" arrives in the middle of a discussion about who left the milk out. The other person is facing months of grievances they didn't know existed, delivered in anger. It's the hardest possible form for them to respond to well. They defend themselves, and you feel unheard again.

Friends, parents and the people you work for

I've written mostly about partners, because that's where the habit is strongest. It operates wherever you expect to be understood.

With friends, it often looks like this. You're going through something hard, such as a redundancy, a parent's illness or a break-up. A good friend knows about it and doesn't ring. You're hurt, and you conclude the friendship isn't what you thought. From their side, they may be unsure whether you want to talk or be left in peace. They may be waiting for a sign from you, or assuming you've got closer people to lean on.

Meanwhile you're both silent, each waiting for the other to make a move. "I'm having a rough time and I'd really like to see you" is a hard sentence to write and a very easy one to receive. I think most people would be glad to get it.

With parents and grown-up children, the expectation often runs in both directions. You feel your mother should know, without being told, that remarks about your weight aren't welcome. She feels you should know, without being told, that she'd like to be rung more often. Each of you is waiting, slightly wounded, for the other to realise. Families go on like this for decades.

A sentence would usually settle it. "Mum, I'd like you not to comment on my weight. It upsets me." It may need saying more than once, since a habit that old doesn't change after one telling. But until it's been said plainly at least once, she can't be blamed for not knowing.

At work the habit is expensive. You work hard, stay late and take on the difficult client, and you wait for it to be recognised. The promotion goes to someone who asked for it. It feels unjust, and in one sense it is. But your manager has eight people to think about, and their own manager, and their own worries. They've taken your silence to mean you're content. It's common, in my observation, for a manager to have had no idea that someone wanted to move up, or wanted a different kind of project, or was unhappy with the hours. If what you want at work hasn't been stated, your manager doesn't know about it.

I'd add one more case, which is the people who serve you. Doctors, hairdressers, builders and teachers all do better work for people who say what they want. "I'd like it shorter than last time." "I'd rather you explained the options than chose for me." If you tell them, they have a chance to get it right.

In each of these, the argument of the earlier chapters applies without change. They can't see how you feel, and your hints don't get through. Having known you for years doesn't help them. And telling them doesn't make whatever they then do for you worth less.

What the habit costs

You may think of the habit as costing the odd bad evening. I think it costs a good deal more. Most of this chapter is my own reckoning, and I'll say where a study comes in.

The thing itself. This is the most obvious cost and the easiest to forget. You didn't get the bath, or the phone call, or the promotion. Each of them was probably available if you'd asked.

A second hurt on top of the first. Wright and Roloff's finding was that the partner's failure to notice becomes its own injury. A hard week turns into a hard week plus a grievance against the person best placed to help with it.

A ledger. Each failed test gets recorded. After some years the ledger is long, and the other person has never seen it. It colours how you read everything they do. A forgotten errand becomes one more entry in a list of evidence that they don't care about you.

What it's like for them. They're living with someone who's intermittently unhappy with them for reasons that aren't explained. I'd expect that to produce a constant low anxiety. They scan for moods and try things at random, and some of what they try makes matters worse. Some become over-attentive. Others withdraw, because they can't work out what's wanted and it's less painful to stop trying.

The good things they do. This one is subtle. While you're watching for the one thing you've silently set as the test, you can miss what they're actually offering. Your partner did the online shop on

Sunday. They asked if you were all right, and they suggested watching something together. None of it counted with you, because none of it was the thing you were waiting for.

Being known. The habit is meant to protect the feeling of being known, and it does the opposite. If you hide your needs, the other person knows you less well. They have a smoothed-over version of you who's always fine. The way to be known better is to tell them more about yourself.

What children learn. If there are children in the house, they're learning how adults get their needs met. They're learning that you go quiet and wait, and that you're hurt when it doesn't work.

The relationship's capacity for repair. Every couple and every friendship runs into real problems sooner or later. Dealing with them needs two people who can say plainly what's wrong and what they want. If you've had years of practice at saying "fine", that skill isn't there when you need it most.

In return for all that, you've been spared the small discomfort of saying a sentence like "Could you do bedtime tonight?" You've also kept open the possibility of an unprompted kindness, and those are scarcer now than they'd be if the two of you talked more.

Working out what you need

Before you can tell someone what you need, you have to know it yourself, and often you don't. On Sunday, if your partner had sat down and said, "Right, what would help?", you might have had no answer ready. You knew you felt bad, and you knew you wanted them to do something. You hadn't worked out what that something was. Part of the hope behind the test is that the other person will work it out for you.

That's a lot to ask. They'd have to read a need that you haven't yet read yourself. So the first step is a private one, and it takes about a minute. The scheme below is mine.

Stop and ask yourself what would actually help in the next few hours. It helps to run through the kinds of thing people generally want when they're low, because the need is usually one of a small number.

You may want to be listened to. You want to tell someone about Tuesday's meeting and have them say, "That sounds awful." You don't want advice on handling your manager.

You may want practical help. You want something taken off your hands, such as the bedtime, the cooking or the phone call to the garage.

You may want company. You don't necessarily want to talk. You want someone in the room, on the sofa, watching something undemanding with you.

You may want to be left alone for a while, without it being taken as a sulk.

You may want affection, in the form of a hug or a hand on your shoulder.

You may want advice. Sometimes you really do want someone else's view on what to do.

And you may want acknowledgement. You want them to know that you've been carrying a lot, and to say so.

These are different, and a response that's perfect for one is wrong for another. If you want listening and get advice, you feel unheard. If you want to be alone and get company, you feel crowded. This is why guessing fails so often, even for an attentive partner. They aren't short of care. They had seven possible answers to pick from, and you gave them nothing to go on.

Once you've named the kind, make it specific. "Practical help" becomes "bedtime tonight", and "listening" becomes "twenty minutes after the kids are down, and please don't try to fix it."

Sometimes you'll run through the list and still not know. That's worth saying too. "I'm out of sorts and I don't know what I need yet. It's not about you. Can I have half an hour and then maybe a chat?" Compare what that gives the other person with what "Fine" gives them. It tells them you're not fine, and that they're not the cause. It says what you need now and what you might need later.

Do this for a few weeks and you'll probably find your needs fall into a pattern, and knowing the pattern makes the next step quicker.

The plain ask

This chapter is about the sentence. The guidance is mine, built on the research in earlier chapters. It hasn't been tested as a set.

Say what you'd like and when. A plain ask has two parts. "I'd like you to do bedtime tonight." "Could we talk for twenty minutes after dinner?" "Would you ring me on Thursday after the appointment?" If a stranger reading the sentence would know exactly what you wanted, it passes the test from chapter 5.

Add a reason if it helps, and keep it short. "It's been a rough week" is plenty. You don't have to justify a need before you're allowed to have it.

Ask for one thing. People can say yes to one request. If you give them five, they hear a complaint.

Leave the history out. "You never notice when I'm struggling" may be what you feel, and it's an accusation about the past. It invites a defence. "I'm struggling today, and I'd like a hug" is about now, and the natural response to it is a hug. If there's a long-standing pattern you need to raise, that's a separate and bigger conversation, and it goes better on a day when you don't also need something.

Say what kind of response you're after. Chapter 15's list is useful here. "I want to tell you about my day. I don't need solutions, I just want you to listen." Many people, offered a problem, reach for a fix. They mean it kindly. If you tell them at the start what you're after, you're both spared the wrong response.

Pick a moment when they can hear it. They won't take it in through a closed door, or while they're in the middle of something. Late at night when you're both exhausted is a bad time too. "Have you got a minute?" is a good way to open.

Make it a request. Your tone does most of this. If you ask through gritted teeth, the message they get is that you shouldn't have had to ask, and the evening goes much as it would have without the asking. If that's how you feel, wait ten minutes.

Let them answer. They may say yes. They may say, "Not tonight, I've got this deadline, but I can do tomorrow." That's a reasonable reply, and chapter 19 deals with outright refusals. They may also be clumsy about it, especially the first few times, when a plain request from you is a novelty.

Thank them. "Thanks, that really helped" costs you nothing, and it tells them the effort landed. People repeat what they know has worked.

Replace "fine". This is the hardest single change and the most useful. When someone asks if you're all right and you aren't, you have three honest options. You can tell them what's wrong. You can use the holding sentence from chapter 15, "I'm not great, but I don't know what I need yet." Or you can say, "I'm not, and I'd rather not talk about it just now, but thanks for asking." "Fine" is none of these. It ends the conversation, and then you hold it against the other person that the conversation ended.

There's one piece of research to keep in mind for the early weeks. Nickola Overall and colleagues filmed sixty-one couples while each person tried to get their partner to change something, and followed them up over the next year. Direct approaches, where people said plainly what they wanted, didn't feel very successful at the time. Straight after the conversations they were rated as less effective than gentler, more roundabout ones. But a year on, it was the direct approaches that had produced change. The softer, indirect ones felt better on the day and changed nothing. So a plain ask may feel more awkward than a hint for a while, and you shouldn't judge it by how it feels that day.

Asking them, too

Everything so far has been about getting your needs across. The habit also works the other way. If you've been expecting to be read, you've probably also been trying to read, and chapter 8 gave reasons to doubt how well that works. The other person has needs you've never heard about, for the same reasons they've never heard about yours.

So the second half of the change is to stop guessing and ask. Eyal, Steffel and Epley's twenty-five experiments came down to that. Trying harder to imagine what the other person wants doesn't make you more accurate. Asking them does.

The most useful question I know has five words. "What would help right now?" It works when your partner comes home grey in the face, or when a friend rings in tears, or your teenager slams a door. It doesn't assume you know. It gives them chapter 15's task, and if they don't know either, you can offer the list. "Do you want to talk about it, or would you rather I just took the kids out for an hour?"

People worry that asking looks inattentive, as if a good partner would simply know. That's the same belief this book has spent twelve chapters on, seen from the other side. Most people who are asked what would help take it as a sign of care.

It also helps to make asking routine, so that it doesn't only happen in a crisis. Some couples set aside ten minutes a week for it, and I think it's a good practice, though I've no study to cite. On a Sunday evening, each person answers two questions. What's coming up

this week that you're worried about? Is there anything you'd like from me? It feels stilted the first couple of times. But it means that needs get stated at a calm moment, before they've turned into grievances, and nobody has to pluck up courage to raise them.

Here's the suggestion I promised in chapter 9, for people who miss unprompted kindnesses. It's to tell each other what you like. You're not asking for it at that moment. You're just letting them know, for future use. "I love it when you bring me tea in bed." "It means a lot when you text me before a big meeting." Most people have never said these things aloud, so their partners are working from guesses that are years out of date. Once the other person knows, they can do them unprompted. You get the surprise you wanted, and it's one that suits you, because you told them what would.

Asking and telling don't make a relationship less romantic or a friendship less natural. They're how the two of you come to know the things that, after a few years, look from outside like being able to read each other.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the start it would have sounded like the advice you've always been given, to just say what you want. By now you've seen why that was hard and why it's still right. Your feelings show far less than you think, your hints mostly read as passing remarks, and years together give people confidence about each other more than they give accuracy. You've also seen that the test only measures guessing. And you've seen that something asked for and gladly given shows care as clearly as anything could.

Here's the rule I'd suggest. Put it in your own words if you like.

When I need something from someone, I tell them what it is in one plain sentence, and I judge them by what they do next.

It has five parts, and each answers a chapter.

I work out the need first. I ask myself what would help, run through the kinds, and make it specific. If I don't know yet, I say that.

I say it plainly. I say what I'd like and when. I ask for one thing and leave the history out. A stranger could understand the sentence.

I don't say "fine" when I'm not. I say what's wrong, or use the holding sentence, or say I'd rather not talk yet.

I judge by the response. Whether they guessed doesn't matter. What matters is whether they were willing once they knew.

I ask them too. I use "What would help right now?" in place of guessing, and I tell them what I like so that they can surprise me.

It helps to plan for the moments when the habit will try to restart. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled ninety-four tests of plans in the form "when X happens, I'll do Y" and found that they make people more likely to follow through. A plan like this works because you've decided what to do before the difficult moment comes. Three are worth writing down.

When someone asks if I'm all right and I'm not, I'll say "Not really" before I can say "Fine".

When I notice I'm sending signals, by sighing or going quiet or banging things, I'll stop and ask myself what I need, and then say it.

When I catch the thought "they should have known", I'll ask myself what exactly I told them, and whether a stranger would have understood it.

I'll be honest about what to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. The first few asks will feel exposed and slightly flat. The other person may be surprised, or clumsy, or may even ask what's brought this on. Overall's couples suggest it will feel less successful than it is. You'll still say "fine" sometimes, out of reflex. Some requests will be refused, and that will sting.

Against that, you should get more of what you need, starting within days, because most of it was available all along. You should spend fewer evenings on imaginary verdicts. The other person should gradually relax, and you may find they start to offer things

unasked, because now they know what's welcome. You won't get a partner who reads your mind. You'll get one who knows more about you, because you've told them.

Forgetting, refusals and times you can't find the words

When you've asked plainly and they forget. Forgetting isn't refusing. Someone who's agreed to take the bins out and doesn't, twice, may need a reminder or a system. They may need the consequences left to fall on them. Ask once more, plainly, and ask what would help them remember. If something has been asked for clearly three or four times and still doesn't happen, you're no longer dealing with a failure to read your mind. You're dealing with unwillingness, and that needs a direct conversation about the pattern itself.

When they say no. A plain ask has to allow for it. A no to bedtime tonight isn't a no to you. Ask whether there's a version they could do. If the answer to most of what you ask is no, month after month, that's important information that the habit was hiding from you. It may be a matter for counselling. Relate is the best-known relationship counselling service in the UK.

When they say "you should just tell me" and then react badly when you do. Some people invite plain speaking and then bristle at it. Point this out calmly and at another time. "When I told you on Tuesday that I needed help, you got cross. That makes it hard to tell you things." If stating a need reliably brings anger, contempt or punishment, go back to the first caution in this book.

When you can't find the words. Grief, shock, exhaustion and illness can leave you unable to work out what you need, let alone say it. The holding sentence is for those times. It's also worth

arranging something beforehand, when you're well. "When I go very quiet, it usually means I need you to sit with me and not ask questions." Then you don't have to say it on the day, because they already know.

When speaking up wasn't safe where you grew up. If you learned as a child that stating a need brought ridicule or anger, the habit protected you then, and it will take more than a book to unlearn. Be patient with yourself. Begin with low-stakes requests to safe people. A counsellor can help, and in England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies.

When the other person reads signals less readily than most. People differ a good deal in how much they pick up from tone and expression. Some notice very little of it. That isn't a lack of care, and no amount of signalling will change it. With someone like this, plain asks make more difference than they do with anyone else. They're often a relief to the other person as well, who may have spent years knowing they were missing something.

When it's your children. Children and teenagers can't read your mind either, and if anything they're worse at it than adults. A parent who silently does everything, and then erupts because nobody helps, is setting the same test. "I'd like you to lay the table every evening without being asked twice" is a plain ask. In my observation children often respond well to requests like that. They also learn from them how to make requests of their own.

When it's a special occasion. Birthdays and anniversaries are when the test is set most often. Tell them what you'd like. You might say, "I'd love a proper fuss this year, a meal out and a card,"

or, "Please don't organise anything, I'd like a quiet day." If presents matter to you, say so, and consider giving a short list. Chapter 8's gift registry study suggests they'll be tempted to ignore it, so tell them you mean it.

When it's about sex. The same principle holds, and the stakes and the embarrassment are higher. Partners can't guess what you like any better in bed than they can anywhere else. One plain sentence, said kindly and at a moment that isn't the middle of things, is worth years of hoping.

When you slip. You'll say "fine" and close a cupboard hard. When you notice, even hours later, go back. "I said I was fine earlier, and I wasn't. I've had a rotten day and I'd like a hug." You can nearly always go back, and doing so helps to undo the habit for both of you.

Sunday again

It's ten to eight on a Sunday evening, some months later. It's been another bad week. There was a row with your sister on Wednesday, and you've a presentation tomorrow that you're dreading.

At four o'clock your partner looked up from the laptop and said, "You all right?" The word "fine" was on its way out. You said, "Not really. Give me a minute."

You stood in the kitchen and ran through the list. You didn't want advice about your sister, and you didn't want to be left alone. You wanted the presentation off your mind for an hour, and you wanted company.

You went back in. "It's been a horrible week, and I'm dreading tomorrow. Could you do bedtime tonight? And then could we just watch something daft together? I don't want to talk about any of it."

They closed the laptop. "Course. Go and sit down. I'll bring you a tea when they're in bed."

It wasn't perfect. At twenty to eight there was shouting from upstairs about toothpaste, and you nearly went up, and didn't. The tea arrived with slightly too much milk in it. Halfway through the programme your partner said, "Is it the thing with your sister?" and you said, "I really don't want to talk about it tonight," and they said, "Sorry. Right. Daft telly."

In the first few weeks it was harder. The first plain ask came out sounding like an accusation, and there was a small row. The second was met with "What's brought this on?" In the third week you said "fine" on a Thursday and then went back on Friday morning to correct it. Your partner looked relieved, which you hadn't expected.

There have been two refusals. You were put out by both. Neither was the end of anything.

Some things have changed that you didn't ask for. Last week there was tea in bed on a Tuesday, unprompted, because in March you'd mentioned that you love it. On Sunday evenings you now spend ten minutes asking each other about the week ahead. That's how you found out that your partner has wanted, for about three years, to be asked about their work more often, and had never said so.

Your partner still doesn't read your mind. On an ordinary day they still can't tell whether you're quiet because you're tired or because something's wrong. They ask, and now they get an answer.

You go to bed at half past ten. The presentation is still tomorrow. The sentence that used to go round in your head on nights like this was that they never notice. Tonight it isn't there.

If you've read this far and changed nothing yet, try one thing. The next time someone you love asks if you're all right and you aren't, say "Not really." Then tell them one thing that would help.

Notes

This book gives general information about ordinary relationships. It isn't counselling, and it's no substitute for a therapist who knows you or for specialist help where there's abuse. The NHS services I mention are those for England as I found them 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, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15 and 20. The couple in the examples are invented, along with the bad week, the bath, the tea and everything said on either Sunday.

Before you start. The two questions and the helpline number are from the NHS page "Getting help for domestic violence and abuse". The two-week guide for low mood is from the NHS pages on depression.

Chapter 3. Eidelson and Epstein, "Cognition and relationship maladjustment: development of a measure of dysfunctional relationship beliefs", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 50, 1982, pages 715 to 720. I couldn't obtain a summary of this paper. That the questionnaire has five parts, one of them on mind reading, is how it's described in the later literature and in my memory of it. Wright and Roloff, cited under chapter 12, are my

source for the statement that such expectations go with less satisfying relationships. The argument that caring and knowing are different abilities is mine.

Chapter 4. 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. The experiments concerned lies, disgust and emergencies, and didn't involve couples. Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes and Pearce, "Invisible overtures: fears of rejection and the signal amplification bias", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, 2003, pages 793 to 812. There were four studies, all about romantic interest between people who weren't yet partners. Applying it to signals of need inside a relationship is my extension, and the chapter says so.

Chapter 5. Keysar and Henly, "Speakers' overestimation of their effectiveness", *Psychological Science* 13, 2002, pages 207 to 212. The sentences in their experiments were ambiguous by design, and the listeners weren't the speakers' partners. Kruger, Epley, Parker and Ng, "Egocentrism over e-mail: can we communicate as well as we think?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, 2005, pages 925 to 936. The list of hints and their meanings is mine. The test of a stranger reading a transcript is also mine.

Chapter 6. Swann and Gill, "Confidence and accuracy in person perception: do we know what we think we know about our relationship partners?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, 1997, pages 747 to 757. The authors add that confidence may be good for a relationship even when it isn't accurate, which is a fair point against me. Savitsky, Keysar, Epley,

Carter and Swanson, "The closeness-communication bias: increased egocentrism among friends versus strangers", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47, 2011, pages 269 to 273. I couldn't obtain a summary of this paper and have relied on its title, as the chapter says. You may have read that couples get worse at reading each other over time. One study is often cited for it, by Thomas, Fletcher and Lange in 1997. I couldn't check it and haven't used it.

Chapter 8. Eyal, Steffel and Epley, "Perspective mistaking: accurately understanding the mind of another requires getting perspective, not taking perspective", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, 2018, pages 547 to 571. The tasks included predicting a spouse's activity preferences and consumer attitudes. Ward and Broniarczyk, "Ask and you shall (not) receive: close friends prioritize relational signaling over recipient preferences in their gift choices", *Journal of Marketing Research* 53, 2016, pages 1001 to 1018. Close givers strayed from the list only when the recipient would know who had given what.

Chapter 9. Maisel and Gable, "The paradox of received social support: the importance of responsiveness", *Psychological Science* 20, 2009, pages 928 to 932. The study was a daily diary and so can't prove cause. The separation of knowing from willing is my own argument, and so is the claim that the test measures only guessing.

Chapter 12. Wright and Roloff, "You should just know why I'm upset: expectancy violation theory and the influence of mind reading expectations (MRE) on responses to relational problems", *Communication Research Reports* 32, 2015, pages 10 to 19. The

participants were people in dating relationships reporting on themselves, and the design was a survey at one point in time. What I say about the partner's side of the silence is my reasoning.

Chapter 16. Overall, Fletcher, Simpson and Sibley, "Regulating partners in intimate relationships: the costs and benefits of different communication strategies", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, 2009, pages 620 to 639. The couples were discussing changes each wanted in the other, which is a harder conversation than asking for a bath. Direct approaches in that study could be positive or negative in tone, and both kinds predicted change. The rest of the chapter's guidance is mine, including the three replacements for "fine".

Chapter 17. Eyal, Steffel and Epley as above. The weekly ten minutes is a common practice among couples' counsellors as far as I know, and I haven't sourced it.

Chapter 18. 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 and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 19. That Relate offers relationship counselling in the UK is general knowledge. Self-referral to NHS talking therapies in England is described on the NHS website. What I say about people who read signals less readily is a general observation. I've deliberately not tied it to any diagnosis.