We are surprisingly terrible at divining what's going on in someone else's mind.

Some of the largest changes we face as a society are cultural—changes to our social world and the way we interact with one another in the digital age. Many of the biggest problems we face—climate change, poverty, unstable regimes—will require careful cooperation among people who don't know one another well and, historically, have not trusted one another. One would think that, as the most recent in a long line of social primates, we Homo sapiens would have all this social stuff worked out by now. After all, our cerebral cortex—the portion of our brains responsible for higher reasoning—is proportionately larger than that of any other primate. But when it comes to understanding even the most basic thoughts or feelings of others, we remain barely more than primitive beings.

Take lying. It would have been evolutionarily advantageous for our ancestors to be able to determine when they were being deceived—natural selection should favor those who possessed exquisitely developed "B.S. detectors." But natural selection is an arms race pitting the detectors against the deceivers, and the deceivers appear to be winning. As cognitive psychologist and professor of business Nicholas Epley points out in "Mindwise," people's ability to tell if someone is lying is "barely better than chance." And this phenomenon isn't restricted to meaningless experiments in some scientist's laboratory—even people whose job it is to know the difference don't do so well.

During the last decade, for instance, the Transportation Safety Administration embraced the nascent science of reading microexpressions (popularized on the Fox TV series "Lie to Me"). The idea behind
Mindwise is good reading for negotiators, the makers of public policy, heck, for an
idea' can be taken as a compliment or an insult, depending on the tone of your voice
post and texts. "The same comment about one's 'nice hair,' 'great question' or 'brilliant
ment of context and subtlety of tone, but which very quickly end up just being
emotions.

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this preference for solitude is a cognitive illusion, that we overestimate how much we enjoy solitude. Commuters were asked about their ideal commute: Would they prefer to talk to the person next to them or sit quietly by themselves? Overwhelmingly, people said that they would rather sit by themselves: The thought of having to make conversation with a seatmate was abhorrent. Commuters were then assigned to either sit alone and "enjoy their solitude" or to talk to the person sitting next to them. Those who talked to their seatmate reported having a significantly more pleasant commute. And the findings weren't due to differences in personality—the results held whether the individuals were outgoing or shy, open or reserved. We don't just lie to others; we lie to (or misunderstand) ourselves.

And although we may be mind-reading primitives, we can use our large cerebral cortices to improve our social skills; there are lessons here for us to learn and apply. For example, one of the biggest hurdles to open communication is fear of reprisal when you've done something you shouldn't. Workers on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf off of Louisiana knew of safety problems but were afraid of reporting them for fear of being fired. Vulnerable workers at the bottom of the corporate food chain may say "everything's OK" even when they know it isn't because they think that's what their bosses want to hear. It isn't the better part of human nature, but it is human nature to lie and it starts early—6-year-olds will say "I didn't do it" while they're in the middle of doing it.

But it is also human nature to forgive, especially when we're given an explanation. In one study, for instance, people who tried to cut in line were forgiven by others even if their explanation was ridiculous. In a line for a copy machine, "May I cut in? I'm on deadline" was no more effective than "May I cut in? I need to make copies." Even an empty explanation, the mere attempt to elicit forgiveness, functions as social glue.

In another case, when doctors started disclosing their mistakes to patients openly, malpractice lawsuits were cut in half. As Mr. Epley says, the biggest impediment to resolution had been "requiring patients to imagine what their doctors were thinking, or having to sue to find out, rather than just allowing doctors to explain how a mistake happened." When we're confronted with the human element, the doctor's constraints and what she is struggling with, we're more likely to understand and forgive.

Mr. Epley concludes: "If being transparent strengthens the social ties that make life worth living . . . and enables others to forgive our shortcomings, why not do it more often?"

—Mr. Levitin is professor of psychology at McGill University and Dean of Arts & Humanities at the Minerva Schools at KGI. His forthcoming book is "The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload."