

Talking To Strangers Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Talking To Strangers* shows how to get better at understanding and making accurate judgments about the people that we don't know, and will help you develop the vital skills of patience and tolerance with others.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



In 1938 Neville Chamberlain, then Prime Minister of Britain, went to Munich to meet with Adolf Hitler. His purpose was to get a read on Hitler's character. Although initially fearful of the possibility of war, Chamberlain left thinking that Hitler was trustworthy.

While most of us don't have to make a character judgment that influential, we do judge one another daily. You've probably thought you knew how someone was feeling already today. We do it all the time, whether at parties, work, or just walking down the street.

If you think you're good at getting a read on people, you're wrong. Everybody we see has different experiences and perspectives, and it's hard to tell what they're thinking. In Malcolm Gladwell's newest book *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know*, he dissects why we're so bad at judging others and what to do about it.

Here are the 3 most helpful lessons I've learned about how we talk to strangers:

1. You are overestimating your ability to read what people are thinking or feeling.
2. Humans naturally default to believing that others are telling the truth and are incapable of telling when someone is lying.

3. One reason you're so bad at judging people is that everybody expresses themselves, emotions and thoughts, differently.

Are you ready to learn how to tell when you're making bad assumptions about people? Let's begin!

Lesson 1: If you tell people that you're naturally good at getting a read on people's thoughts or emotions, you're wrong.

Who better to look to on the accuracy of making judgments than a bail judge? Solomon is one in New York City who makes a point to look at the people he sentences in the eye. After all, how can you know if a person is shady or not unless you can see it in their eyes?

Against artificial intelligence, however, Solomon and other judges did worse at assessing people than the computers. In [a 2017 study](#), one Harvard economist fed his program the same information the judges got before making their decisions. **The defendants that the judges gave bail were 25% more likely to go out and commit another crime than those the computer would have chosen.**

We all think we can make a decision about someone just by looking at them. The truth is, we're overconfident about this ability that doesn't even exist.

Still think you're the outlier? Wait until you hear about this next study. Back in 2001 a psychologist performed a study in which she had participants fill in missing letters for words, like "GL_ _." Most people, when asked what their answers said about them, declared that what they wrote wasn't an indication of how they were feeling.

But when the same group looked at answers that other participants shared, the story was different. They confidently declared, for example, that certain answers meant people were tired, or goal-oriented. Even with a tiny amount of information we think that we can make a decision about someone. Yet we hold firm that we ourselves are more complex than that.

Lesson 2: Knowing when another person is lying is not something that humans are good at.

Do you think you'd be able to spot a Cuban spy if you worked with one? Ana Montes worked for the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and while there fed US secrets to Cuba. It was only after she was found out that the DIA realized the red flags were there all along.

Montes's reports often contained Cuban viewpoints. Sometimes she would take phone calls while a crisis was happening. Although there all along, nobody thought anything beyond a faint feeling of suspicion. It felt more likely that she was just weird than a spy.

Everybody faces the same problem the DIA faced. **Our default is to believe people are telling the truth, assuming it until we have enough evidence that they are lying.**

In a study by psychologist Tim Levine, participants were asked to tell who was lying in a mock scenario of people talking about a test they had taken. After multiple runs of the experiment, results continue to show that people can accurately determine a liar only 54% of the time.

Levine concludes that people need a clear trigger to tell if someone isn't telling the truth. But as we're about to see, even triggers might not work. Emotions aren't expressed in the same way by everyone.

Lesson 3: There is no uniform way that every person expresses themselves, so it's hard to tell what is really going on inside their heads.

If you've ever seen the show *Friends*, you know how easy it is to tell what the characters are feeling. Shock is shown by wide eyes and a jaw drop, while anger is narrow-eyed and furrowed brows. You can read their faces like a book. But this isn't how people work in the real world.

The idea that our disposition expresses how we feel is called transparency and is misleading. In one study, scientists tried to surprise participants and asked what they thought their faces would show they felt. **Although most people thought they looked surprised, only five percent had the "typical" wide-eyed and dropped jaws that we usually associate with surprise!** And as we're about to see, this works with other emotions as well.

In 2007 a British student named Meredith Kercher was murdered by a man named Rudy Guede. At first, the police suspected Kercher's roommate, Amanda Knox. They came to a bizarre conclusion about Knox's motives. They used only Knox's actions after the murder to pin her as a suspect.

After Kercher's death, many of her friends mourned. But Knox expressed physical affection for her boyfriend in front of everyone instead. When a colleague mentioned that they had hoped that Knox didn't suffer, Kercher was abrasively blunt about what had happened. This didn't look like grief.

But it turned out that Knox wasn't guilty. Her actions were only a different way of expressing her personality and how she felt about her roommate's death.

Talking To Strangers Review

I always like a good Malcolm Gladwell book, and his *Talking To Strangers* didn't disappoint. The stories in this book are as fascinating as they are eye-opening to how bad we are at judging others. This is one book that I hope everyone in the world reads because we can all be a little more understanding of each other.

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Who would I recommend the Talking To Strangers summary to?

The 52-year-old judge who hopes that they are making fair decisions, the 34-year-old who works in a large city and passes many strangers everyday, and anyone who thinks that they are good at reading how people are feeling.

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