

Autism more closely linked an inability to ‘read’ other people than inflexible thinking and lack of self-control

For more than 30 years, scientists have debated which of two cognitive abilities, theory of mind and executive function, is more closely related to autism.

Difficulty with [theory of mind](#) — the ability to infer other people’s mental states — can [complicate social behavior](#) and [communication](#).

Trouble with flexible thinking, working memory and self-control — the core executive functions — can impair the ability to adapt to changing situations, understand new concepts, set goals and keep [calm](#).

Until now, research into which of the two abilities relates more to core autism traits has been inconsistent. My team has new findings suggesting that theory of mind is the more important contributor to autism and that problems with executive function are more often associated with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). The latter [often accompanies autism](#).

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The more difficulties the adolescents in our study had with theory of mind tasks, the higher their levels of repetitive behaviors and social communication difficulties, we found. Problems with executive function tasks, however, are not related to either trait.

We do not know why theory of mind skills influence repetitive behavior and rigid thinking. It is possible that the connection is indirect: Having trouble deciphering others’ behavior might cause [anxiety](#), which could lead to unusual behavior and thought [patterns](#).

Read full, original post: [Separate thinking skills underlie autism, attention deficit](#)