

How to Read Body Language: Part One

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

There are two ways you can use body language to enhance your face-to-face interactions: by observing the body language of the person you're speaking to and by controlling your own body language. Understanding what others are telling you through their nonverbal communication and taking control of the signals you are sending has the potential to improve your ability to communicate. Your body's actions and responses actually do speak louder than words. It's all a matter of knowing what to look for.

Positive nonverbal communication is usually quite reliable as an indicator of the way a person feels unless gestures become exaggerated. Exaggerated communication suggests a negative response. Negative nonverbal actions are less reliable. Actions that are most often construed as negative may simply reflect comfort level, energy level, or personal distraction. Do not jump to conclusions if you observe what you think is negative body language.

Here are some things to look for when you are communicating with someone:

Relaxed Posture. There are probably no major barriers to communication if the person you are talking with appears comfortable and is breathing naturally. If their body is tense, their motions choppy, their hands clasped in front of them, or they have turned their palms face down on the table in front of them, there may be cause for concern.

Body Language. A person who is relaxed and open generally keeps their arms, legs, and feet uncrossed. Keeping one's jacket open is also a sign of openness -- and honesty. Crossing one's arms is often a sign of defensiveness, and if it is done in conjunction with leaning back, it may convey superiority or smugness. If it's done in the context of an established relationship it may simply be a relaxed gesture. Leaning forward demonstrates interest and involvement.

Eye Contact: Direct eye contact is generally expected in western cultures. It demonstrates the person you are talking with is interested in you and what you have to say. It builds trust and strengthens the bond with the person you are communicating with. When we are talking with someone we generally maintain eye contact for about one-third of the time, looking away from time to time. To look at someone less suggests you are bored or have something to hide. It may convey a lack of interest which makes the speaker feel uncomfortable. Looking at someone for longer periods of time may intimidate them or, conversely, demonstrate enthusiasm and caring. It depends on what other nonverbal communication accompanies the prolonged eye contact.

Handshakes and Hands. One of the first things you do when you are introduced to someone is shake hands. What does your handshake say about you? What do others' handshakes say about them? I am always surprised when I shake hands with someone who only proffers their fingers or presents like a limp fish. It is equally disturbing to have your hand grasped by what someone

who seems intent on breaking your fingers. Not too strong. Not too weak. Your handshake says a lot about you and it needs to be perfected.

Hands are not just for shaking. Exposing them when you gesture suggests honesty and truthfulness. Movements with your palms positioned downward suggests authority. A person may make a fist and with an accompanying gesture that signifies 'at a boy.' One may pound their fist on a table for emphasis. Simply clenching one's hands suggests anger and aggression.

Leaning Forward or Backward: People who are interested lean forward. When someone leans backward they are generally rejecting you or remaining aloof.

Standing and Distance. In the United States most people are comfortable standing just under two feet away from someone they are speaking with. Further apart is strained. Closer has sexual overtones and creates responses in accordance with the feelings of the one being approached. Comfortable distances vary dramatically from culture to culture as do other nonverbal signals.

Nodding. Nodding in response to another's remarks suggest interest and understanding. Bobbing of one's head, on the other hand, indicates the person you are talking with has tuned you out. Shaking of the head is generally a negative response.

Smiles: Smiles demonstrate interest, enthusiasm, excitement, empathy and a host of other positive responses. There is nothing like a genuine smile to convey a positive response. Frowning or a narrowing of the lips, on the other hand, is negative.

Facial Expressions. Expressions can be very telling. A wrinkled brow may indicate one is perplexed. Raised eyebrows can demonstrate enlightenment. Looking around all the time suggests disinterest. Opening one's mouth frequently makes it appear you want to interrupt. Try observing others and their facial expressions to see all the things that can be conveyed with one's face.

Gesturing. Using gestures to speak is more common in some cultures than others. Talking with one's hands, especially with exposed palms, demonstrates openness and involvement. Fidgeting, on the other hand, is most often a sign of boredom, nervousness or lack of patience.

Touching. A well-intentioned touch can easily be misconstrued. Be careful. Don't touch unless you have mastered the art of nonverbal communication. You will be treading on thin ice.

Mirroring: Pay attention to the person you are talking with. In what position are they standing or sitting? How fast are they talking? What is the speed of their breathing. Try mimicking these cues to establish rapport more quickly.

Note Taking. Do you want to let the person you are speaking with know that you find what they are saying of importance? Take notes. It's a great compliment.

Keep your verbal and nonverbal messages congruent. This is the best way to deliver your messages. If, however, you do make a hostile statement in a friendly voice, the listener will

discount the hostility and perceive the message to be friendly. And that's because nonverbal communication is more powerful than the words you speak.

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