

Body Language Basics

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"If language was given to men to conceal their thoughts, then gesture's purpose was to disclose them." John Napier

For millions of years, our early ancestors ambled on this planet, navigating a very dangerous world. They did so by communicating effectively their needs, emotions, fears, and desires with each other. Impressively, they achieved this through the use of nonverbal communications such as physiological changes (flushed face), gestures (pointing hand), noises (grunting is not a word) and facial or body reactions (quizzical or frightened look). This has been part of our biological heritage for so long that we still primarily communicate nonverbally, not verbally, and why we need emotional icons in our written communication.

Fortunately for us we evolved a system to immediately communicate to others how we feel and what we sense. If not for this, a room might be dangerously hot - not just warm and a swim in a lake might turn into hypothermia. If we had to think, even for a few seconds, at every perilous encounter (imagine a coiled rattle snake by your leg) we would have died out as a species. Instead we evolved to react to threats or anything that might harm us and not to think (the "freeze, flight, fight response" I talk about in *Louder Than Words*).

This system that evolved over time, which alerts us instantly of any perceived danger, also instantly communicates to others around us. Just as our brain forces us to freeze in place when we see an aggressive dog or large felines while on safari, it also communicates to others instantly, through our bodies, whether or not we are comfortable or uncomfortable, content or miserable, safe or unsafe. The benefit is two fold, we react to the world around us and others benefit from our early reactions even as we do from theirs. For example, taste something putrid and everyone around you will know from your expression; they don't need to taste it also. Quick, authentic, and reliable: body language as I said in *What Every Body is Saying*, is the

"shortcut to communicating what is most important" because it has been evolutionarily beneficial.

And it is not just about survival or threats, although that is the primary reason we react to certain things so visibly (loud sounds make us freeze or cower in place). Our brain also telegraphs our intentions. This is why when you are talking to someone you like and suddenly you notice that one of their feet points toward their car or an elevator, you know that the person probably needs to go. Because they are running late, the body through the legs communicates that something urgent is pressing (causing psychological discomfort) even though the person continues the conversation. Which is why we say when it comes to communication, body language is more truthful than the spoken word.

So what is psychologically behind all of this? Simply this: Our needs, feelings, thoughts, emotions, and intentions are processed elegantly by what is known as the "limbic system" of the brain. It doesn't have to think, it just reacts to the world in real time and our bodies show how we feel. Someone gives us bad news and our lips compress; the bus leaves without us and we are clenching our jaws and rubbing our necks. We are asked to work another weekend and the orbits of our eyes narrow as our chin lowers. These are discomfort displays that our limbic brain has perfected over millions of years, whether we are in China or Chile.

Conversely, when we see someone we really like, our eyebrows will arch defying gravity, our facial muscles will relax, and our arms become more pliable (even extended) so we can welcome this person. In the presence of someone we love, we will mirror their behavior (isopraxis), tilt our heads, and blood will flow to our lips making them full, even as our pupils dilate. Once again, our limbic brain communicates through our bodies precisely the true sentiments that we feel and orchestrates accurate corresponding nonverbal displays.

In a way, our bodies don't really have to do these behaviors and yet we evolved to demonstrate them for a reason: we are social animals that need to communicate both verbally and nonverbally. How do we know body language is essential for us? Children who are born blind, having never seen these behaviors will also perform them. A blind child will cover his eyes when he hears something he doesn't like in the same way my neighbor does whenever I ask him to help me move heavy objects. Fortunately these

behaviors are hard-wired.

Whether in business, at home, or in relationships, we can always be assured that true sentiments will be reflected in our body language through displays of comfort and discomfort. This binary system of communicating how we feel has stood the test of time and survived to help us through its elegant simplicity.

Obviously this can be very effective in determining how others feel about us and in evaluating how a relationship is evolving. Often when people sense that something is wrong in a relationship, what they are sensing are changes in body language displays. Couples who no longer touch or walk close together are easy to spot but sometimes the more subtle behaviors are even more accurate. An example of this is when couples touch each other with their fingertips rather than their full hand (distancing behavior) indicative of psychological discomfort. This behavior alone may portend serious problems in the relationship that on the surface may not be so obvious (*Clues to Deceit*).

And so while there are many aspects of nonverbal communications and body language, focusing on comfort and discomfort can go a long way in helping us to see more clearly what others are truly feeling, thinking, fearing or desiring. Having that extra insight gives us a more honest appraisal of others and it will in the end assist us in communicating more effectively and empathetically for a deeper understanding.

Full website reference

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/spycatcher/201108/body-language-basics>