

The Art of Reading Body Language

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“You talking to me? You talking to me?”

Remember the young Robert de Niro’s famous line in *Taxi Driver*? Oh, the on-screen menace he conveyed physically, while the question itself was as innocent as a lettuce leaf. Body language can completely obliterate the actual words being spoken.

The term Kinesics (interpretation of body language), was coined by an anthropologist, one Ray Birdwhistell, in the 1950s. He was fascinated by non-verbal communication – the power of movement, gesture, posture and stance.

Birdwhistell decided that less than 40% of our communication is verbal; the rest is conveyed by our movements, expressions and so on. This is still up for dispute, but there’s no question that our non-verbal language speaks volumes.

It’s important to remember, of course, that Earth is home to thousands of different cultures, and interpretations may be quite at odds from one culture to another. Burp and belch in Turkey and some Middle Eastern countries, and you have excellent manners. At your next office get-together, not so much.

Remember too that body language has more to do with how a person is feeling rather than whatever they are saying.

Useful-to-know body language signs

1. Hands on hips, legs apart

This can be assertive. It can also be aggressive.

Does it mean “I am angry”? Does it mean “I’m putting a stop to this”? It could simply demonstrate a feeling of resoluteness, or it could be an attempt to intimidate. It is a physical way of taking control of a situation without necessarily speaking. How confrontational it is will, of course, be determined by the circumstances and accompanying facial expressions.

2. Hands over the groin

Women and children do this more than men. It conveys modesty and vulnerability. It is also a pose adopted by therapists to appear non-intimidating to patients.

It can also mean “I don’t want you to know what I feel”, a highly self-protective mechanism. And of course, finally, it could just mean feeling tired.

You be the judge.

3. I need the loo

Hopping from one foot to the other could indicate an extreme case of the above. But it often just means “I want to leave”, or “I am in a hurry”, or “I’m so bored, let me out of here”.

Of course, hopping about could be thanks to bare feet on hot concrete. Even so, the main communication is feeling trapped and wanting to escape.

4. Eyeball to eyeball

When someone stares directly into your eyes, it's an attention-grabbing manoeuvre. Whether it is an angry stare or a seductive gaze, it's an attempt to reduce your resistance. And gain dominance.

This stare is rude, unless it is between intimate parties or in a situation of urgency; for instance, needing to tell you something as vital as "Don't step back, there's a mamba right behind you".

In romantic situations, the submissive party will look down or away first. As the relationship develops, this may change.

5. "Don't you touch me!" Personal space

Touching someone can be interpreted as an assault on their personal space. Our personal space zone is about 14cm and we don't like space invaders.

In mutually agreed intimacy, both parties agree to drop barriers. Non-sexual intimacy includes whispering, helping someone to carry things, and of course giving a pal a friendly punch on the arm, placing your arm around their shoulders, or a good hug.

Touching other people is also a way of testing how much they trust you and how open they are to you.

The arm clasp and the handshake are universal gestures of a readiness to engage courteously, indicating both parties come in peace.

6. Turning away

This usually means the other person either wants to hide something from you, or to exclude you. We may deliberately turn away when we are angry, literally 'refusing to face' what has upset us.

Turning back to face someone when you are angry indicates you are now giving them all your attention... more than they might want.

Turning away from another person is also a sign of superiority. It is a powerful gesture to the other to back off, a clear message that they are not welcome in your personal space. You are not afraid and do not believe they have the power to hurt you.

All the above, of course, encompasses non-violent body language. Violence is a subject on its own.

7. Crossing arms and legs

This defensive stance means you are protecting yourself. It says, "You are not going to get through to me". It reflects a closed state of mind, the message that "I'm not interested in your ideas or what you have to say".

This stance is not threatening; rather, it expresses restraint.

There are also, of course, purely physical reasons for this posture. Crossing legs and arms may be to stay warm, or because we're feeling ill.

Finally, crossing legs and arms may be used to say, "Leave me be, I need some alone time". As the observer, it is up to you to interpret what the message is.

8. Seizing ground

This could mean taking a position at the head of the table or standing over someone who is sitting. Stepping up to a podium is also seizing ground.

This appropriation of the 'high ground' is a normal gesture from older family members or superiors at work. In ordinary social circumstances it does not threaten, it simply takes command of the situation.

In dangerous situations, a leader may need to step up to call for calm and to persuade people to pull together.

9. Mirroring

This is a truly fascinating aspect of non-verbal behaviour. We mirror each other by repeating, or unconsciously imitating, the poses, gestures and general body language of another. Mirroring is literally copying and repeating the other's body language. You cross your arms. So does the person next to you, then the person next to him, and so on until the whole group may be standing with arms crossed. Rather than shutting others out, like the crossing of arms and legs message discussed above, this copycat language means we're bonding emotionally.

Be aware, this technique is also widely used by the unscrupulous. Salespeople and sometimes con artists practice mirroring methods to cajole and persuade their targets to agree with their suggestions.

Mirroring is as viral as a fast-spreading meme. In a group, it's contagious. Laughing, running and yawning are all viral body language.

Finally, and fortunately not often, mirroring can be fatal. Like lemmings leaping over a cliff edge, groups may move in the same direction, faster and faster until there is a stampede, even though the danger originally envisaged is not real.

A quick translation guide

- Arms crossed over the chest = defensiveness or disagreement.
- Nail-biting = stress, nervousness, insecurity. Or, it may just be a habit the perpetrator is unconscious of.
- Hand on cheek = deep thought or concentration, perhaps decision-making.
- Finger-tapping = impatience.
- Head tilt = listening carefully, truly interested.
- Touching the nose = a signal of disbelief or rejection, or demonstrates the individual is lying. Naturally it can also just mean an itchy nose.
- Rubbing hands together = this may simply be to warm the hands. Or it may mean enthusiasm and anticipation.
- "Steepling" fingers or placing the fingertips together = authority and control. Often used by politicians to indicate they're in charge.
- Palms open, facing upward = a sign of submission or having nothing to hide. Back when people carried weapons, this was to show they were unarmed.
- Head in hands = boredom or feeling upset and ashamed.
- Chin- or beard stroking = deep thought, trying to reach a decision.
- Ear pulling = lack of decisiveness, inability to reach a conclusion.

You may just find that, after this little foray into non-verbal language, you are able to read much more into conversations and recognise underlying messages you were previously unaware of. You will also be surprised at how much you instinctively read body language in any case.

Either way, interpreting body language in conjunction with the spoken word is a useful and fascinating tool, both in private life and in the world of business.

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