

Nonverbal Communication

Reading Body Language and Improving Your Nonverbal Skills



While the key to success in both personal and professional relationships lies in your ability to communicate well, it's not the words that you use but your nonverbal cues or "body language" that speak the loudest. Your facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, and level of eye contact are powerful communication tools. They can put people at ease, build trust, and draw others towards you, or they can offend, confuse, and undermine what you're trying to convey. By improving how you understand and use nonverbal communication, you can express what you really mean, connect better with others, and build stronger, more rewarding relationships.

What is body language?

Body language is the use of physical behavior, expressions, and mannerisms to communicate nonverbally, often done instinctively rather than consciously. Whether you're aware of it or not, when you interact with others, you're continuously giving and receiving wordless signals. All of your nonverbal behaviors—the gestures you make, the way you sit, how fast or how loud you talk, how close you stand, how much eye contact you make—send strong messages. These messages don't stop when you stop speaking either. Even when you're silent, you're still communicating nonverbally.

In some instances, what comes out of your mouth and what you communicate through your body language may be two totally different things. If you say one thing, but your body language says something else, your listener will likely feel that you're being dishonest. If you say "yes" while shaking your head no, for example. When faced with such mixed signals, the listener has to choose whether to believe your verbal or nonverbal message. Since body language is a natural, unconscious language that broadcasts your true feelings and intentions, they'll likely choose the nonverbal message.

Why does nonverbal communication matter?

Your nonverbal communication cues—the way you listen, look, move, and react—tell the person you’re communicating with whether or not you care, if you’re being truthful, and how well you’re listening. When your nonverbal signals match up with the words you’re saying, they increase trust, clarity, and rapport. When they don’t, they can generate tension, mistrust, and confusion.

If you want to become a better communicator, it’s important to become more sensitive not only to the body language and nonverbal cues of others, but also to your own.

Nonverbal communication can play five roles:

- **Repetition:** It repeats and often strengthens the message you’re making verbally.
- **Contradiction:** It can contradict the message you’re trying to convey, thus indicating to your listener that you may not be telling the truth.
- **Substitution:** It can substitute for a verbal message. For example, your facial expression often conveys a far more vivid message than words ever can.
- **Complementing:** It may add to or complement your verbal message. As a boss, if you pat an employee on the back in addition to giving praise, it can increase the impact of your message.
- **Accenting:** It may accent or underline a verbal message. Pounding the table, for example, can underline the importance of your message.

Source:

The Importance of Effective Communication, Edward G. Wertheim, Ph.D.

Types of nonverbal communication

The many different types of nonverbal communication or body language include:

Facial expressions. The human face is extremely expressive, able to convey countless emotions without saying a word. And unlike some forms of nonverbal communication, facial expressions are universal. The facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust are the same across cultures.

Body movement and posture. Consider how your perceptions of people are affected by the way they sit, walk, stand, or hold their head. The way you move and carry yourself communicates a wealth of information to the world. This type of nonverbal communication includes your posture, bearing, stance, and the subtle movements you make.

Gestures. Gestures are woven into the fabric of our daily lives. You may wave, point, beckon, or use your hands when arguing or speaking animatedly, often expressing yourself with gestures without thinking. However, the meaning of some gestures can be very different across cultures. While the OK sign made with the hand, for example, conveys a positive message in English-speaking countries, it's consider offensive in countries such as Germany, Russia, and Brazil. So, it's important to be careful of how you use gestures to avoid misinterpretation.

Eye contact. Since the visual sense is dominant for most people, eye contact is an especially important type of nonverbal communication. The way you look at someone can communicate many things, including interest, affection, hostility, or attraction. Eye contact is also important in maintaining the flow of conversation and for gauging the other person's interest and response.

Touch. We communicate a great deal through touch. Think about the very different messages given by a weak handshake, a warm bear hug, a patronizing pat on the head, or a controlling grip on the arm, for example.

Space. Have you ever felt uncomfortable during a conversation because the other person was standing too close and invading your space? We all have a need for physical space, although that need differs depending on the culture, the situation, and the closeness of the relationship. You can use physical space to communicate many different nonverbal messages, including signals of intimacy and affection, aggression or dominance.

Voice. It's not just what you say, it's **how** you say it. When you speak, other people "read" your voice in addition to listening to your words. Things they pay attention to include your timing and pace, how loud you speak, your tone and inflection, and sounds that convey understanding, such as "ahh" and "uh-huh." Think about how your tone of voice can indicate sarcasm, anger, affection, or confidence.

Can nonverbal communication be faked?

There are many books and websites that offer advice on how to use body language to your advantage. For example, they may instruct you on how to sit a certain way, steeple your fingers, or shake hands in order to appear confident or assert dominance. But the truth is that such tricks aren't likely to work (unless you truly feel confident and in charge). That's because you can't control all of the signals you're constantly sending about what you're really thinking and feeling. And the harder you try, the more unnatural your signals are likely to come across.

However, that doesn't mean that you have no control over your nonverbal cues. For example, if you disagree with or dislike what someone's saying, you may use negative body

language to rebuff the person's message, such as crossing your arms, avoiding eye contact, or tapping your feet. You don't have to agree, or even like what's being said, but to communicate effectively and not put the other person on the defensive, you can make a conscious effort to avoid sending negative signals—by maintaining an open stance and truly attempting to understand what they're saying, and why.

How nonverbal communication can go wrong

What you communicate through your body language and nonverbal signals affects how others see you, how well they like and respect you, and whether or not they trust you. Unfortunately, many people send confusing or negative nonverbal signals without even knowing it. When this happens, both connection and trust in relationships are damaged, as the following examples highlight:

Jack

believes he gets along great with his colleagues at work, but if you were to ask any of them, they would say that Jack is “intimidating” and “very intense.” Rather than just look at you, he seems to devour you with his eyes. And if he takes your hand, he lunges to get it and then squeezes so hard it hurts. Jack is a caring guy who secretly wishes he had more friends, but his nonverbal awkwardness keeps people at a distance and limits his ability to advance at work.

Arlene

is attractive and has no problem meeting eligible men, but she has a difficult time maintaining a relationship for longer than a few months. Arlene is funny and interesting, but even though she constantly laughs and smiles, she radiates tension. Her shoulders and eyebrows are noticeably raised, her voice is shrill, and her body is stiff. Being around Arlene makes many people feel anxious and uncomfortable. Arlene has a lot going for her that is undercut by the discomfort she evokes in others.

Ted

thought he had found the perfect match when he met Sharon, but Sharon wasn't so sure. Ted is good looking, hardworking, and a smooth talker, but seemed to care more about his thoughts than Sharon's. When Sharon had something to say, Ted was always ready with wild eyes and a rebuttal before she could finish her thought. This made Sharon feel ignored, and soon she started dating other men. Ted loses out at work for the same reason. His

inability to listen to others makes him unpopular with many of the people he most admires.

These smart, well-intentioned people struggle in their attempt to connect with others. The sad thing is that they are unaware of the nonverbal messages they communicate.

If you want to communicate effectively, avoid misunderstandings, and enjoy solid, trusting relationships both socially and professionally, it's important to understand how to use and interpret body language and improve your nonverbal communication skills.

How to improve nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is a rapidly flowing back-and-forth process that requires your full focus on the moment-to-moment experience. If you're planning what you're going to say next, checking your phone, or thinking about something else, you're almost certain to miss nonverbal cues and not fully understand the subtleties of what's being communicated. As well as being fully present, you can improve how you communicate nonverbally by learning to manage stress and developing your emotional awareness.

Learn to manage stress in the moment

Stress compromises your ability to communicate. When you're stressed out, you're more likely to misread other people, send confusing or off-putting nonverbal signals, and lapse into unhealthy knee-jerk patterns of behavior. And remember: emotions are contagious. If you are upset, it is very likely to make others upset, thus making a bad situation worse.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by stress, take a time out. Take a moment to calm down before you jump back into the conversation. Once you've regained your emotional equilibrium, you'll feel better equipped to deal with the situation in a positive way.

The fastest and surest way to calm yourself and manage stress in the moment is to employ your senses—what you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—or through a soothing movement. By viewing a photo of your child or pet, smelling a favorite scent, listening to a certain piece of music, or squeezing a stress ball, for example, you can quickly relax and re-focus. Since everyone responds differently, you may need to experiment to [find the sensory experience](#) that works best for you.

Develop your emotional awareness

In order to send accurate nonverbal cues, you need to be aware of your emotions and how they influence you. You also need to be able to recognize the emotions of others and the true feelings behind the cues they are sending. This is where [emotional awareness](#) comes in.

Being emotionally aware enables you to:

- Accurately read other people, including the emotions they're feeling and the unspoken messages they're sending.
- Create trust in relationships by sending nonverbal signals that match up with your words.
- Respond in ways that show others that you understand and care.

Many of us are disconnected from our emotions—especially strong emotions such as anger, sadness, fear—because we've been taught to try to shut off our feelings. But while you can deny or numb your feelings, you can't eliminate them. They're still there and they're still affecting your behavior. By developing your emotional awareness and connecting with even the unpleasant emotions, though, you'll gain greater control over how you think and act. To start developing your emotional awareness, practice the mindfulness meditation in HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#).

How to read body language

Once you've developed your abilities to manage stress and recognize emotions, you'll start to become better at reading the nonverbal signals sent by others. It's also important to:

Pay attention to inconsistencies. Nonverbal communication should reinforce what is being said. Is the person saying one thing, but their body language conveying something else? For example, are they telling you “yes” while shaking their head no?

Look at nonverbal communication signals as a group. Don't read too much into a single gesture or nonverbal cue. Consider all of the nonverbal signals you are receiving, from eye contact to tone of voice and body language. Taken together, are their nonverbal cues consistent—or inconsistent—with what their words are saying?

Trust your instincts. Don't dismiss your gut feelings. If you get the sense that someone isn't being honest or that something isn't adding up, you may be picking up on a mismatch between verbal and nonverbal cues.

Evaluating nonverbal signals

Eye contact - Is the person making eye contact? If so, is it overly intense or just right?

Facial expression - What is their face showing? Is it masklike and unexpressive, or emotionally present and filled with interest?

Tone of voice - Does the person's voice project warmth, confidence, and interest, or is it

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strained and blocked?

Posture and gesture - Is their body relaxed or stiff and immobile? Are their shoulders tense and raised, or relaxed?

Touch - Is there any physical contact? Is it appropriate to the situation? Does it make you feel uncomfortable?

Intensity - Does the person seem flat, cool, and disinterested, or over-the-top and melodramatic?

Timing and place - Is there an easy flow of information back and forth? Do nonverbal responses come too quickly or too slowly?

Sounds - Do you hear sounds that indicate interest, caring or concern from the person?

Recommended reading

[About Nonverbal Communications](#) - Different categories of nonverbal communication, along with a detailed list of signals. (Adam Blatner, M.D.)

[Body Language: Understanding Nonverbal Communication](#) - Particularly as it applies to the workplace. (MindTools)

[Take Control of Your Nonverbal Communication \(video\)](#) - How to notice and use body language. (Harvard Business Review)

[The Importance of Nonverbal Communication \(PDF\)](#) - Piece by Edward G. Wertheim, Ph.D. about the communication process. (Northeastern University)

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