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How to Read Facial Expressions

You can improve your ability to read others' emotions

By [Arlin Cuncic](#) | Updated on March 30, 2021

✓ [Medically reviewed](#) by [David Susman, PhD](#)



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The ability to understand facial expressions is an important part of [nonverbal communication](#). If you only listen to what a person says and ignore what their face is telling you, then you really won't get

If you have [social anxiety disorder \(SAD\)](#), you might have a hard time paying attention to facial expressions. You might have trouble with [eye contact](#) or read too much into negative expressions on other people's faces. People with SAD often interpret facial expressions more negatively (even if they're neutral), and they may even avoid looking at negative facial expressions altogether. ^[1]

Although it is important to pay attention to facial expressions, remember that knowing the emotion doesn't tell you the cause. If someone seems bored, upset, or disinterested, it could be for a number of reasons—and it could have nothing to do with you.

The value in understanding facial expressions is to gather information about how the other person is feeling and guide your interaction accordingly. For example, if someone appears disinterested, they might just be tired, and it might be time to end the conversation.

Related: [Emotions and Types of Emotional Responses](#)

Universal Expressions

Research by Dr. Paul Ekman tells us that there are seven universal facial expressions that we all use, even across cultural divides. These expressions show: ^[2]

Anger

Contempt

Disgust

Fear

Surprise

Research from 2020 confirmed the existence of universal facial expressions and took the idea even further, suggesting we may share a total of 16 complex expressions: [\[3\]](#)

Amusement

Anger

Awe

Concentration

Confusion

Contempt

Contentment

Desire

Disappointment

Doubt

Elation


Interest

Pain

Sadness

Surprise

Triumph



Practice making the facial expressions that go along with these emotions and you will become better at recognizing them in other people.

Related: [The 6 Types of Basic Emotions and Their Effect on Human Behavior](#)

Not all facial expressions stick around for a long time. Those that pass quickly are called micro-expressions, and they are almost indiscernible to the casual observer. Micro-expressions can come and go in less than half a second—but they convey the same emotions as a longer-lasting facial expression would. ^[4]

Micro-expressions are often connected with emotions that a person is trying to conceal, and looking at micro-expressions could reveal whether someone is being truthful or lying. ^[5]

Spotting and interpreting micro-expressions is often [difficult](#), but it's a skill that can be learned. ^[6] If you have SAD, learning to notice micro-expressions could also help improve your overall understanding of other people's emotions.

Identify Facial Expressions by Facial Feature

We convey a lot of nonverbal information in our faces, and we tend to focus on different areas of the face when we try to interpret what each expression might mean. We look at the eyes to determine if someone is sad or angry, for example, and at the mouth to check if someone is happy. ^[7]

Eyebrows

Eyebrows can show distinctive emotional signals (and they're potentially as important as the eyes for facial recognition). ^[8]

Eyebrows can be:

Raised and arched (showing surprise)

Eyes

The eyes are often described as "windows to the soul," and we often look to them to determine what someone else may be feeling. The eyes might be:

Blinking quickly (meaning distress or discomfort) or blinking too little (which may mean that a person is trying to control their eyes) [\[9\]](#)

Dilated (showing interest or even arousal) [\[10\]](#)

Staring intensely (which could show attention or anger) or looking away (showing discomfort or distraction) [\[11\]](#)

Mouth

The mouth can convey more than just a [smile](#). People often use their mouths to mask other emotions their face is conveying—for example, a forced smile might cover up an eye micro-expression showing someone's true feelings. [\[12\]](#)

Look out for:

A dropped jaw (which signals surprise)

Open mouth (showing fear)

One side of the mouth raised (which could indicate hate or contempt)

Raised corners (meaning happiness)

Corners that are drawn down (conveying sadness)

Other signals to look for are:

Lip biting (which may be a sign of anxiety)

Related: [Understanding Body Language and Facial Expressions](#)

A Word From Verywell

If you find you are having a hard time reading other people's emotions through their expressions, you might need more practice, or you might simply have trouble decoding what others are feeling.

Some mental health conditions (including SAD) can impact your ability to decipher other people's facial expressions. If this is the case for you and it's causing you distress, consider seeking help from a mental health professional. They can determine what's causing your difficulty and help you learn skills to cope.

Related: [An Overview of Social Skills Training](#)

12 Sources



By [Arlin Cuncic](#)

Arlin Cuncic, MA, is the author of "Therapy in Focus: What to Expect from CBT for Social Anxiety Disorder" and "7 Weeks to Reduce Anxiety."



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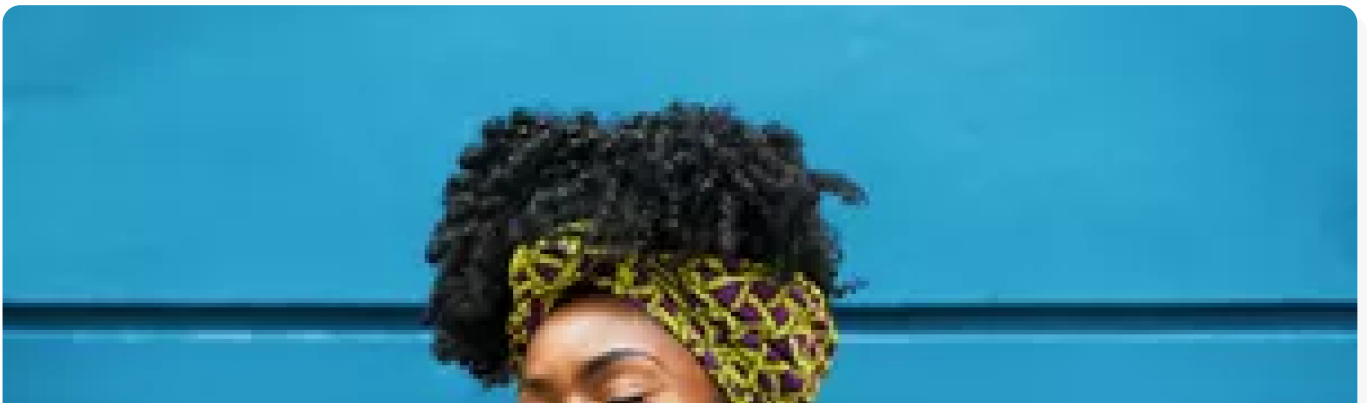
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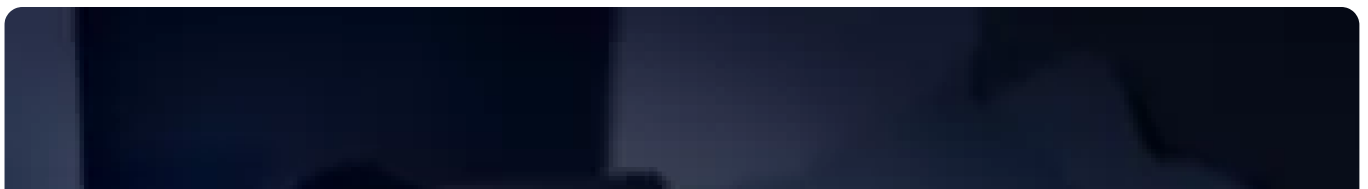
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