

Nonverbal Communication

Improving Your Nonverbal Skills and Reading Body Language



It's well known that good communication is the foundation of any successful relationship, be it personal or professional. It's important to recognize, though, that it's our nonverbal communication—our facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice—that speak the loudest. The ability to understand and use nonverbal communication, or body language, is a powerful tool that can help you connect with others, express what you really mean, and build better relationships.

What is nonverbal communication and body language?

When we interact with others, we continuously give and receive wordless signals. All of our nonverbal behaviors—the gestures we make, the way we sit, how fast or how loud we talk, how close we stand, how much eye contact we make—send strong messages. These messages don't stop when you stop speaking either. Even when you're silent, you're still communicating nonverbally.

Oftentimes, what comes out of our mouths and what we communicate through our body language are two totally different things. When faced with these mixed signals, the listener has to choose whether to believe your verbal or nonverbal message, and, in most cases, they're going to choose the nonverbal because it's a natural, unconscious language that broadcasts our true feelings and intentions in any given moment.

Why nonverbal communication matters

The way you listen, look, move, and react tells the other person 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 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 cues can play five roles:

- **Repetition:** they can repeat the message the person is making verbally.
- **Contradiction:** they can contradict a message the individual is trying to convey.
- **Substitution:** they can substitute for a verbal message. For example, a person's eyes can often convey a far more vivid message than words do.
- **Complementing:** they may add to or complement a verbal message. A boss who pats a person on the back in addition to giving praise can increase the impact of the message.
- **Accenting:** they may accent or underline a verbal message. Pounding the table, for example, can underline a message.

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

Types of nonverbal communication and body language

There are many different types of nonverbal communication. Together, the following nonverbal signals and cues communicate your interest and investment in others.

Facial expressions

The human face is extremely expressive, able to express 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 movements and posture

Consider how your perceptions of people are affected by the way they sit, walk, stand up, 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 subtle movements.

Gestures

Gestures are woven into the fabric of our daily lives. We wave, point, beckon, and use our hands when we're arguing or speaking animatedly—expressing ourselves with gestures often without thinking. However, the meaning of gestures can be very different across cultures and regions, so it's important to be careful 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 response.

Touch

We communicate a great deal through touch. Think about the messages given by the following: a weak handshake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, a reassuring slap on the back, a patronizing pat on the head, or a controlling grip on your arm.

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 we speak, other people "read" our voices in addition to listening to our 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 someone's tone of voice, for example, can indicate sarcasm, anger, affection, or confidence.

Nonverbal communication can't be faked

You may be familiar with advice on how to sit a certain way, steeple your fingers, or shake hands just so 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 off about what you're really thinking and feeling. And the harder you try, the more unnatural your signals are likely to come across.

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 are damaged.

Nonverbal communication and body language in relationships

Ted, Arlene, and Jack are all articulate speakers who say one thing while communicating something else nonverbally, with disastrous results in their relationships:

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 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 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 Ted 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 nonverbal signals.

Setting the stage for effective nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is a rapidly flowing back-and-forth process requiring your full concentration and attention. If you are planning what you're going to say next, daydreaming, or thinking about something else, you are almost certain to miss nonverbal cues and other subtleties in the conversation. You need to stay focused on the moment-to-moment experience in order to fully understand what's going on.

To improve nonverbal communication, learn to manage stress

Learning how to manage stress in the heat of the moment is one of the most important things you can do to improve your nonverbal communication. 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. Furthermore, emotions are contagious. You being upset is very likely to trigger others to be upset, making a bad situation worse.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by stress, it's best to 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 be better equipped to deal with the situation in a positive way.

How emotional awareness strengthens nonverbal communication

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.

Emotional awareness 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, notice, and care.
- Know if the relationship is meeting your emotional needs, giving you the option to either repair the relationship or move on.

Tips for reading body language and nonverbal communication

Once you've developed your abilities to manage stress and recognize emotions, you'll naturally become better at reading the nonverbal signals sent by others.

- **Pay attention to inconsistencies.** Nonverbal communication should reinforce what is being said. Is the person is saying one thing, and their body language 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 eye contact being made? 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 their voice project warmth, confidence, and interest, or is it strained and blocked?
Posture and gesture	Are their bodies relaxed or stiff and immobile? Are shoulders tense and raised, or slightly sloped?
Touch	Is there any physical contact? Is it appropriate to the situation? Does it make you feel uncomfortable?
Intensity	Do they seem flat, cool, and disinterested, or over-the-top and melodramatic?
Timing and pace	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 caring or concern?

As you continue to pay attention to the nonverbal cues and signals you send and receive, your ability to communicate will improve.

More help for nonverbal communication

[Effective Communication: Improving Communication Skills in Business and Relationships](#)

[Conflict Resolution Skills: Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities](#)

[Relationship Help: Advice for Building Relationships that are Healthy, Happy and Satisfying](#)

[Fixing Relationship Problems with Humor: Using Laughter and Play to Build and Maintain Successful Relationships](#)

Resources and references

General information about nonverbal communication

About Nonverbal Communications – Overview of the different categories of nonverbal communication, along with a detailed list of signals. (Adam Blatner, M.D.)

Body Language: Understanding Nonverbal Communication – Guide to body language and nonverbal communication, particularly as it applies to the workplace. (MindTools)

Using Body Language – Learn about various nonverbal message clusters that indicate things such as aggression, attention, boredom, defensiveness, and attraction. (Changing Minds)

The Power of Nonverbal Communication – Explore an MIT professor's insights into nonverbal communication cues, and what it means in the work world. (The Wall Street Journal)

Who Are You (And What Do You Think of Me?) – Tips for reading the nonverbal signals in a job interview situation, when meeting someone new, and on a date. (Psychology Today)

The Importance of Nonverbal Communication (PDF) – Piece by Edward G. Wertheim, Ph.D. about the communication process and how managers can make constructive and effective feedback to workers. (Northeastern University)

Uses of Nonverbal Communication – Covers a variety of nonverbal communication methods, including signals used to control conversation and convey personality and status. (Changing Minds)

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