

AEN 105: COMMUNICATION SKILLS





## Nonverbal Communication

### The Power of Nonverbal communication and Body Language

Good communication is the foundation of successful relationships, both personally and professionally. But we communicate with much more than words. In fact, research shows that the majority of our communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication, or body language, includes our facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and even the tone of our voice.

The ability to understand and use nonverbal communication is powerful tools that will help you connect with others, express what you really mean, navigate challenging situations, and build better relationships at home and work.

In This Article:

- 🔗 [Power of nonverbal communication](#)
- 🔗 [Nonverbal communication in relationships](#)
- 🔗 [Types of nonverbal communication](#)
- 🔗 [Using body language](#)
- 🔗 [Improving nonverbal skills](#)
- 🔗 [Related links](#)

### The power of nonverbal communication and body language

Nonverbal communication, or body language, is a vital form of communication. When we interact with others, we continuously give and receive countless 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.

The way you listen, look, move, and react tell the other person whether or not you care and how well you're listening. The nonverbal signals you send either produce a sense of interest, trust, and desire for connection—or they generate disinterest, distrust, and confusion.

**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 and often 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.

## Nonverbal communication and body language in relationships

It takes more than words to create fulfilling, strong relationships. Nonverbal communication has a huge impact on the quality of our relationships. Nonverbal communication skills improve relationships by helping you:

❑ Accurately read other people, including the emotions they're feeling and the unspoken messages they're sending.

❑ Create trust and transparency in relationships by sending nonverbal signals that match up with your words.

❑ Respond with nonverbal cues that show others that you understand, notice, and care.

Unfortunately, many people send confusing or negative nonverbal signals without even knowing it. When this happens, both connection and trust are lost in our relationships.

### Consider the case of Arlene:

Arlene is attractive and has no problem meeting eligible men — it's keeping them that is the problem! Arlene is funny and a good conversationalist, but even though she laughs and smiles constantly, she radiates tension. Arlene's shoulders and eyebrows are noticeably raised, her voice is shrill and her body stiff to touch. 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.

Arlene is articulate, attractive, and well-intentioned, but she struggles to connect with others because she isn't aware of the nonverbal messages she's communicating. But she can break this pattern if she learns to pay attention to the wordless signals she sends and receives:

Arlene notices that her date is tapping his fingers and that she has been swinging her leg and foot. He looks bored, and she feels tense all over. Taking a long, deep breath and a swallow of wine, she feels her shoulders drop and her jaw relax. Arlene leans across the



table and breaks into a warm smile. Her date smiles back, and their eyes meet and hold. She has also used her new observational skills at work and is now much more comfortable interacting with others in that setting.

## **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 firm handshake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, a reassuring pat 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, aggression, dominance, or affection.

### Voice

We communicate with our voices, even when we are not using words. Nonverbal speech sounds such as tone, pitch, volume, inflection, rhythm, and rate are important communication elements. When we speak, other people —read|| our voices in addition to listening to our words. These nonverbal speech sounds provide subtle but powerful clues into our true feelings and what we really mean. Think about how tone of voice, for example, can indicate sarcasm, anger, affection, or confidence.

It's not what you say, it's how you say it

□ Intensity. A reflection of the amount of energy you project is considered your intensity. Again, this has as much to do with what feels good to the other person as what you personally prefer.

□ Timing and pace. Your ability to be a good listener and communicate interest and involvement is impacted by timing and pace.

□ Sounds that convey understanding. Sounds such as —ahhh, ummm, ohhh|| uttered with congruent eye and facial gestures, communicate understanding and emotional connection. More than words, these sounds are the language of interest, understanding and compassion.

Using body language and nonverbal communication successfully

Nonverbal communication is a rapidly flowing back-and-forth process. Successful nonverbal communication depends on emotional self-awareness and an understanding of the cues you're sending, along with the ability to accurately pick up on the cues others are sending you. This requires 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.

Tips for successful nonverbal communication:

❑ Take a time out if you're feeling overwhelmed by stress. Stress compromises your ability to communicate. When you're stressed out, you're more likely to misread other people, send off confusing or off-putting nonverbal signals, and lapse into unhealthy knee-jerk patterns of behavior. 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.

❑ Pay attention to inconsistencies. Nonverbal communication should reinforce what is being said. If you get the feeling that someone isn't being honest or that something is —off,|| you may be picking up on a mismatch between verbal and nonverbal cues. 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 sending and

receiving, from eye contact to tone of voice and body language. Are your nonverbal cues consistent—or inconsistent—with what you are trying to communicate?

Improving your nonverbal communication skills

Before you can improve your nonverbal communication skills, you need to figure out what you're doing right and where there is room for improvement. The most effective method is to observe yourself in action:

❑ Video camera- Videotape a conversation between you and a partner. Set the camera to record both of you at the same time, so you can observe the nonverbal back-and-forth. When you watch the recording, focus on any discrepancies between your verbal and nonverbal communication.

❑ Digital camera- Ask someone to take a series of photos of you while you're talking to someone else. As you look through the photos, focus on you and the other person's body language, facial expressions, and gestures.

❑ Audio recorder- Record a conversation between you and a friend or family member. As you listen to the recording afterwards, concentrate on the way things are said, rather than the words. Pay attention to tone, timing, pace, and other sounds.



As you watch or listen to the recordings, ask yourself the following questions:

### **Evaluating your nonverbal communication skills**

#### **Eye contact**

Is this source of connection missing, too intense, or just right in yourself or in the person you are looking at?

#### **Facial expression**

What is your face showing? Is it masklike and unexpressive, or emotionally present and filled with interest? What do you see as you look into the faces of others?

#### **Tone of voice**

Does your voice project warmth, confidence, and delight, or is it strained and blocked? What do you hear as you listen to other people?

#### **Posture and gesture**

Does your body look still and immobile, or relaxed? Sensing the degree of tension in your shoulders and jaw answers this question. What do you observe about the degree of tension or relaxation in the body of the person you are speaking to?

#### **Touch**

Remember, what feels good is relative. How do you like to be touched? Who do you like to have touching you? Is the difference between what you like and what the other person likes obvious to you?

#### **Intensity**

Do you or the person you are communicating with seem flat, cool, and disinterested, or over-the-top and melodramatic? Again, this has as much to do with what feels good to the other person as it does with what you personally prefer.

#### **Timing and pace**

What happens when you or someone you care about makes an important statement? Does a response—not necessarily verbal—come too quickly or too slowly? Is there an easy flow of information back and forth?

#### **Sounds**



Do you use sounds to indicate that you are attending to the other person? Do you pick up on sounds from others that indicate their caring or concern for you?

Evaluating your nonverbal communication skills

Source: The Language of Emotional Intelligence, by Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.