

# Interpreting Body Language

## Objective

To increase your understanding of body language in order to improve your communication with others.

## You Should Know

You might think that good communication skills involve expressing yourself clearly and listening attentively to others. This is true, but sometimes what you say does not always indicate what you actually mean or feel. It is the non-verbal communication, through body language, that provides the most accurate information about thoughts and emotions.

Facial expressions, posture, and tone of voice offer important clues. The signals you send with your own body language can help others understand your mood and intentions. When you pay attention to physical signals, you are less likely to project your own emotions onto another person, or to misinterpret the other person's feelings. This is especially helpful during conflict or challenging interactions when you might experience overwhelming thoughts and emotions.

## What You Should Do

By understanding body language – both your own and the other person's – you will be able to communicate more clearly and respond appropriately to difficult conversations and interactions. Here are some common physical cues and the emotions they convey.

BODY LANGUAGE	EMOTIONS
Eye contact or gazing into the eyes.	Attention, caring, affection
Smiling, talkative, clapping hands, singing, jumping up and down or dancing, laughing.	Joy, excitement, happiness
Red flushed face and neck, clenched hands, pursed lips, crossed arms, hands on hips, looking down or away, clenched teeth, frowning, staring.	Anger, dislike, annoyance, aggression
Frowning, looking down or away, slumped posture; low, quiet, or monotone voice.	sadness, hurt
Talking quickly and nervously, inability to sit still, shaking, pacing, speechlessness, crossed arms, frozen in place, sweating.	Anxiety, nervousness, fear
Covering face, hiding, slumping, looking down or away.	Shame, embarrassment, guilt

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Can you think of others aspects of body language that you should pay attention to?

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Think of a time that you realized someone was angry, sad, happy, or anxious, based on their facial expressions, posture, or gestures. Describe the physical signals you noticed.

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Think of a time that you realized someone was not paying attention as you spoke to them, based on their facial expressions, posture, or gestures. Describe the physical signals you noticed.

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When a person's non-verbal communication seems confusing or is difficult to interpret, there are some questions you can ask to get more clarity:

- "You look upset. Is everything alright?"
- "I notice that you seem nervous. Am I correct?"
- "How are you feeling?"
- "Are things okay between us?"

Can you think of other clarifying questions? List them here.

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Now, focus on your own body language and what it conveys to others about your moods and feelings. Have you ever been told that your words did not match your body language? Explain.

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Has a person ever understood that you were mad, sad, anxious, etc., in spite of what you said or did not say? Explain.

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Next, think of a recent challenging interaction you had with someone.

Describe the interaction. What happened? Who were you with? What was said?

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Describe your emotions.

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Describe any physical sensations you experienced.

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Describe any facial expressions, posture, and movements that you remember expressing.

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Describe the other person's facial expressions, posture, and movements.

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Try this exercise again with someone you trust, using a recent or imaginary scenario of a difficult conversation. Take turns observing each other's body language as you role play.

Describe the interaction. What happened? Who were you with? What was said?

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Describe how you interpreted the other person's emotions.

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Describe the person's body language.

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Did the person's body language make it easier to understand what they were thinking and feeling? Explain.

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Did the person's body language impact the way you responded? Explain.

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Ask the other person to describe your facial expressions, posture, and movements, and to interpret your emotions.

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Did the person correctly interpret your emotions? If not, what was incorrect? How could you increase your awareness of your body language in the future?

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### Reflections on This Exercise

Think of an upcoming situation where increasing your awareness of body language – your own and others’ – will be helpful in communicating effectively. Describe.

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What body language would you most like to increase or improve, for future interactions? Why?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?

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