

Understanding Body Language and Facial Expressions

Body language refers to the nonverbal signals that we use to communicate. According to experts, these nonverbal signals make up a huge part of daily communication.

From our facial expressions to our body movements, the things we don't say can still convey volumes of information.

It has been suggested that body language may account for between 60 to 65% of all communication.

Understanding body language is important, but it is also essential to pay attention to other cues such as context. In many cases, you should look at signals as a group rather than focusing on a single action.

Here's what to look for when you're trying to interpret body language.

Facial Expressions



Think for a moment about how much a person is able to convey with just a facial expression. A smile can indicate approval or happiness. A frown can signal disapproval or unhappiness.

In some cases, our facial expressions may reveal our true feelings about a particular situation. While you say that you are feeling fine, the look on your face may tell people otherwise.

Just a few examples of emotions that can be expressed via facial expressions include:

- Happiness
- Sadness
- Anger
- Surprise
- Disgust
- Fear
- Confusion
- Excitement
- Desire
- Contempt

The expression on a person's face can even help determine if we trust or believe what the individual is saying.

One study found that the most trustworthy facial expression involved a slight raise of the eyebrows and a slight smile. This expression, the researchers suggested, conveys both friendliness and confidence.

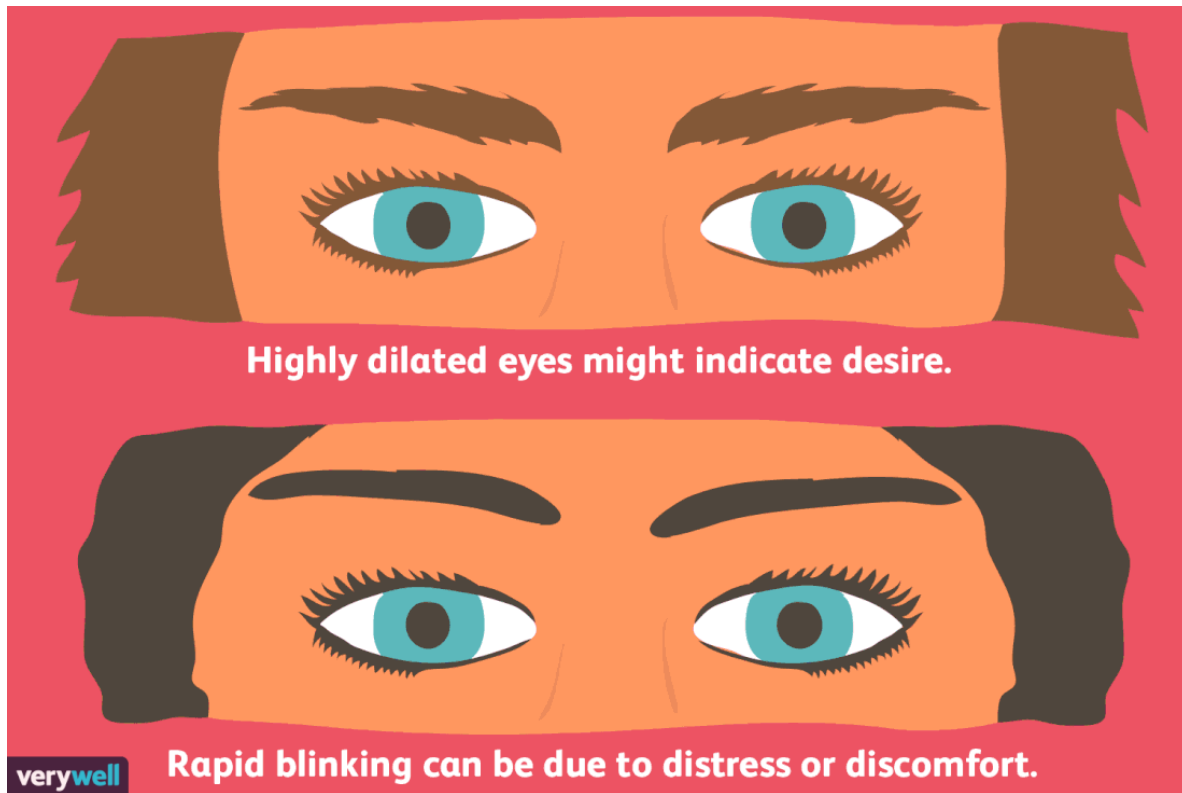
Facial expressions are also among the most universal forms of body language. The expressions used to convey fear, anger, sadness, and happiness are similar throughout the world.

Researcher Paul Ekman has found support for the universality of a variety of facial expressions tied to particular emotions including joy, anger, fear, surprise, and sadness.

Research even suggests that we make judgments about people's intelligence based upon their faces and expressions.

One study found that individuals who had narrower faces and more prominent noses were more likely to be perceived as intelligent. People with smiling, joyful expression were also judged as being more intelligent than those with angry expressions.

The Eyes



The eyes are frequently referred to as the "windows to the soul" since they are capable of revealing a great deal about what a person is feeling or thinking.

As you engage in conversation with another person, taking note of eye movements is a natural and important part of the communication process.

Some common things you may notice include whether people are making direct eye contact or averting their gaze, how much they are blinking, or if their pupils are dilated.

When evaluating body language, pay attention to the following eye signals.

Eye Gaze

When a person looks directly into your eyes while having a conversation, it indicates that they are interested and paying attention. However, prolonged eye contact can feel threatening.

On the other hand, breaking eye contact and frequently looking away might indicate that the person is distracted, uncomfortable, or trying to conceal his or her real feelings.⁶

Blinking

Blinking is natural, but you should also pay attention to whether a person is blinking too much or too little.

People often blink more rapidly when they are feeling distressed or uncomfortable. Infrequent blinking may indicate that a person is intentionally trying to control his or her eye movements.

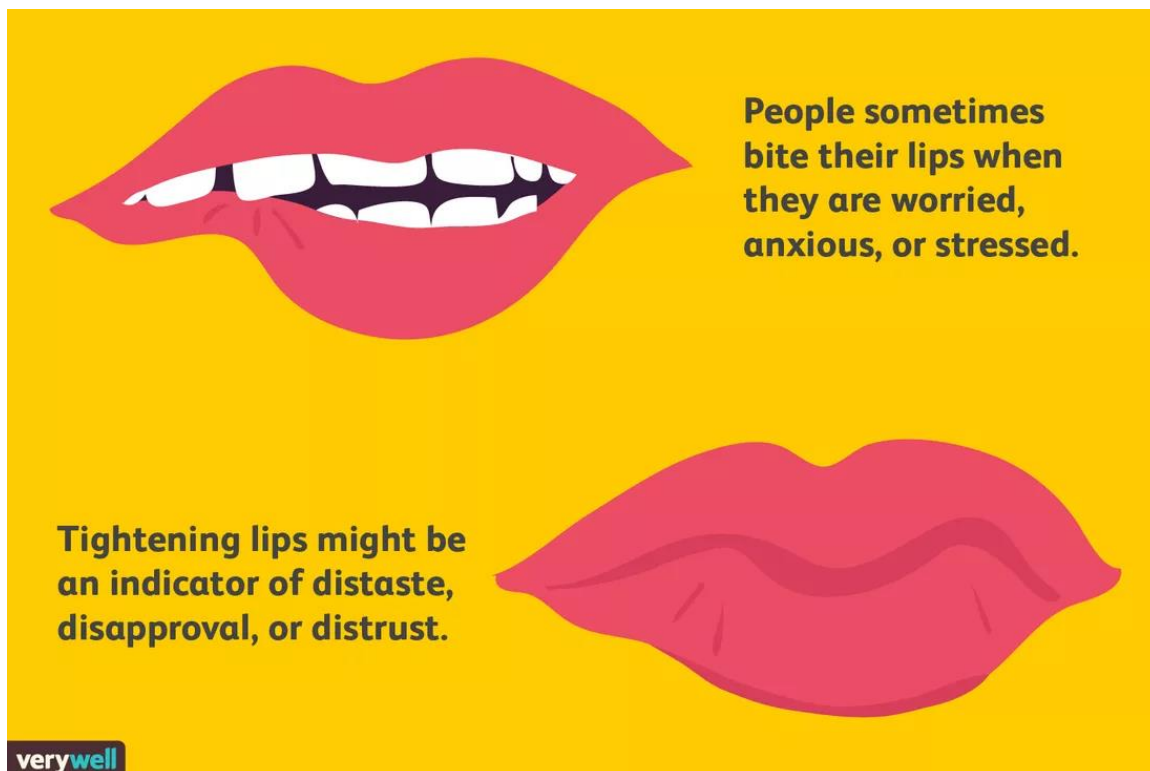
For example, a poker player might blink less frequently because he is purposely trying to appear unexcited about the hand he was dealt.

Pupil Size

Pupil size can be a very subtle nonverbal communication signal. While light levels in the environment control pupil dilation, sometimes emotions can also cause small changes in pupil size.

For example, you may have heard the phrase "bedroom eyes" used to describe the look someone gives when they are attracted to another person. Highly dilated eyes, for example, can indicate that a person is interested or even aroused.⁸

The Mouth



Mouth expressions and movements can also be essential in reading body language. For example,

chewing on the bottom lip may indicate that the individual is experiencing feelings of worry, fear, or insecurity.

Covering the mouth may be an effort to be polite if the person is yawning or coughing, but it may also be an attempt to cover up a frown of disapproval.

Smiling is perhaps one of the greatest body language signals, but smiles can also be interpreted in many ways.

A smile may be genuine, or it may be used to express false happiness, sarcasm, or even cynicism.⁹

When evaluating body language, pay attention to the following mouth and lip signals:

- **Pursed lips.** Tightening the lips might be an indicator of distaste, disapproval, or distrust.
- **Lip biting.** People sometimes bite their lips when they are worried, anxious, or stressed.
- **Covering the mouth.** When people want to hide an emotional reaction, they might cover their mouths in order to avoid displaying smiles or smirks.
- **Turned up or down.** Slight changes in the mouth can also be subtle indicators of what a person is feeling. When the mouth is slightly turned up, it might mean that the person is feeling happy or optimistic. On the other hand, a slightly down-turned mouth can be an indicator of sadness, disapproval, or even an outright grimace.

Gestures



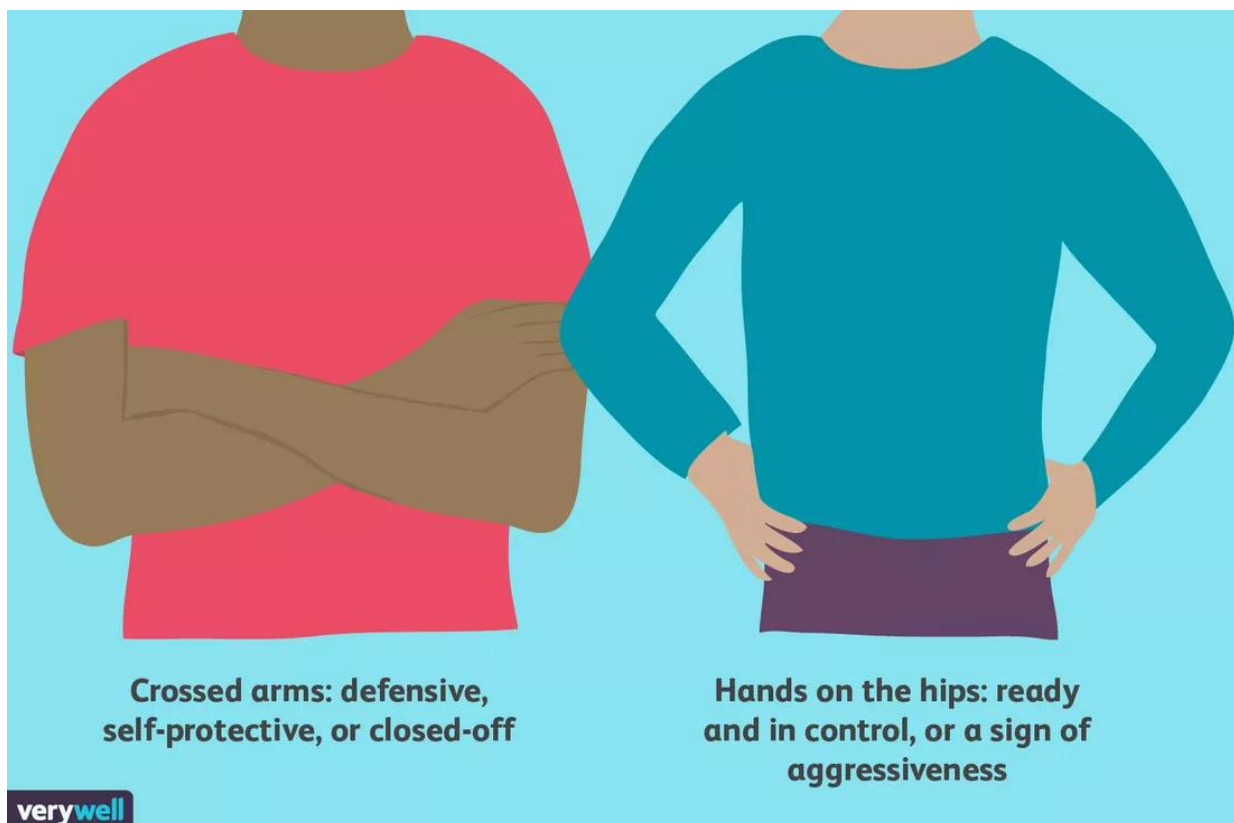
Gestures can be some of the most direct and obvious body language signals. Waving, pointing, and using the fingers to indicate numerical amounts are all very common and easy to understand gestures.

Some gestures may be cultural, however, so giving a thumbs-up or a peace sign in another country might have a completely different meaning than it does in the United States.

The following examples are just a few common gestures and their possible meanings:

- A clenched fist can indicate anger in some situations or solidarity in others.
- A thumbs up and thumbs down are often used as gestures of approval and disapproval.¹⁰
- The "okay" gesture, made by touching together the thumb and index finger in a circle while extending the other three fingers can be used to mean "okay" or "all right."¹⁰ In some parts of Europe, however, the same signal is used to imply you are nothing. In some South American countries, the symbol is actually a vulgar gesture.
- The V sign, created by lifting the index and middle finger and separating them to create a V-shape, means peace or victory in some countries. In the United Kingdom and Australia, the symbol takes on an offensive meaning when the back of the hand is facing outward.

The Arms and Legs



The arms and legs can also be useful in conveying nonverbal information. Crossing the arms can indicate

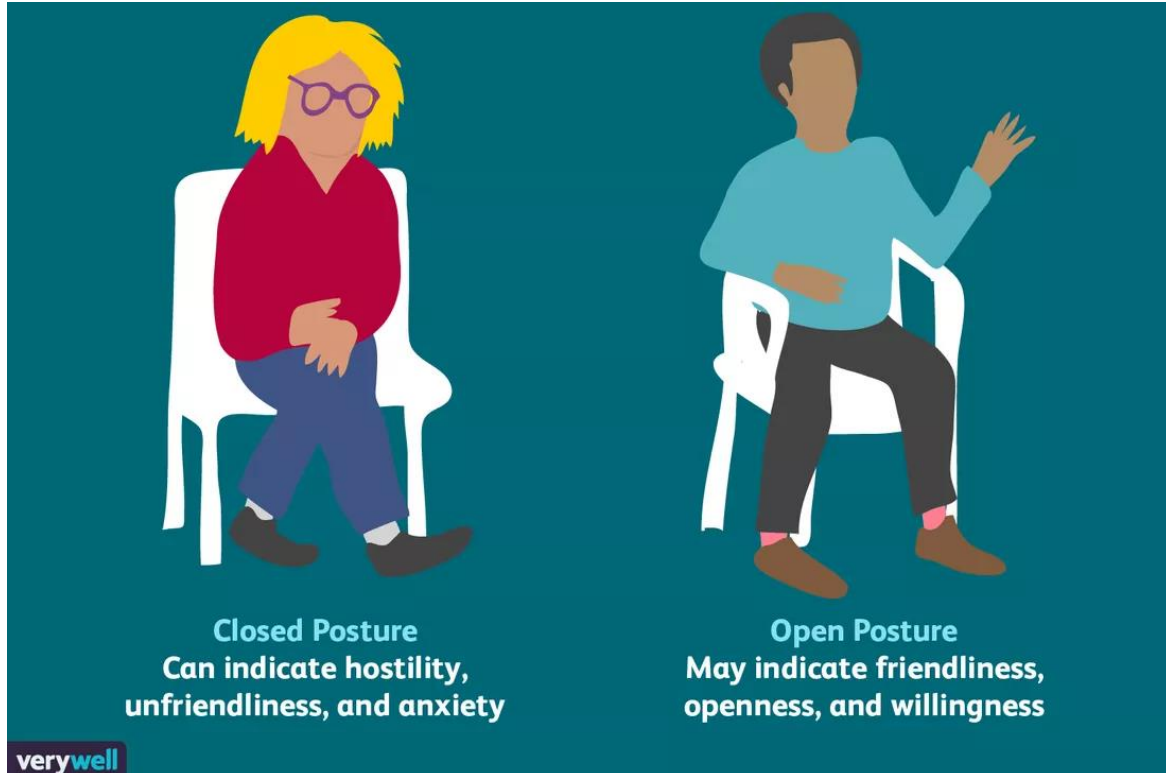
defensiveness. Crossing legs away from another person may indicate dislike or discomfort with that individual.

Other subtle signals such as expanding the arms widely may be an attempt to seem larger or more commanding while keeping the arms close to the body may be an effort to minimize oneself or withdraw from attention.

When you are evaluating body language, pay attention to some of the following signals that the arms and legs may convey:

- **Crossed arms** might indicate that a person feels defensive, self-protective, or closed-off.²
- **Standing with hands placed on the hips** can be an indication that a person is ready and in control, or it can also possibly be a sign of aggressiveness.
- **Clasping the hands behind the back** might indicate that a person is feeling bored, anxious, or even angry.
- **Rapidly tapping fingers or fidgeting** can be a sign that a person is bored, impatient, or frustrated.
- **Crossed legs** can indicate that a person is feeling closed off or in need of privacy.

Posture



How we hold our bodies can also serve as an important part of body language.

The term posture refers to how we hold our bodies as well as the overall physical form of an individual.

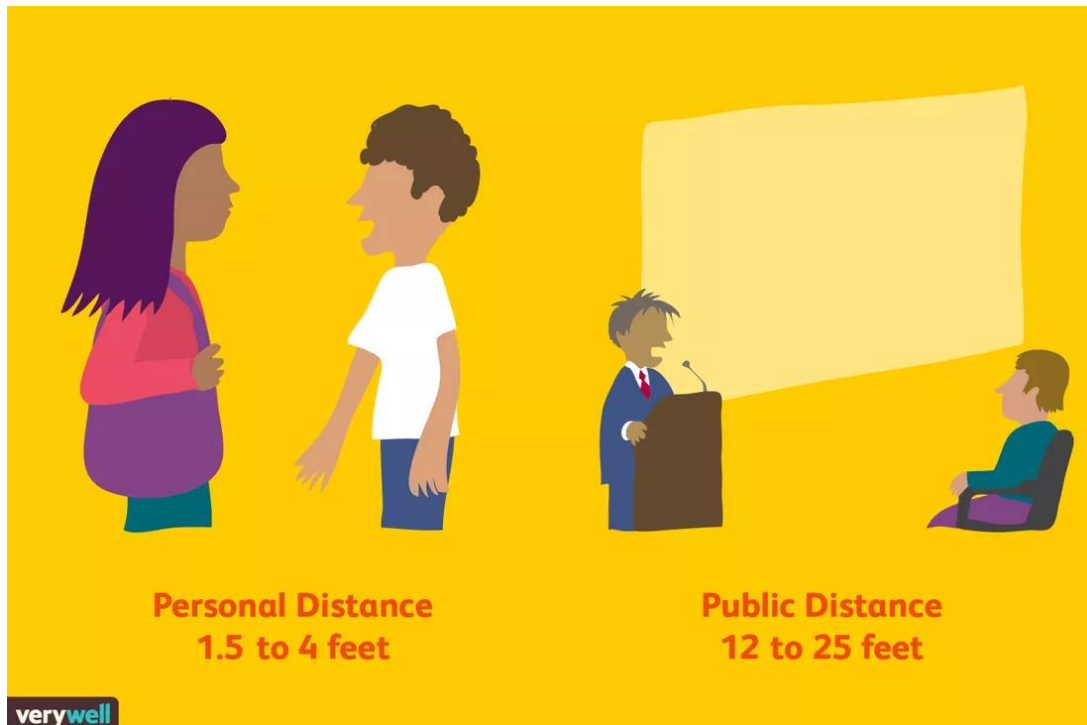
Posture can convey a wealth of information about how a person is feeling as well as hints about personality characteristics, such as whether a person is confident, open, or submissive.

Sitting up straight, for example, may indicate that a person is focused and paying attention to what's going on. Sitting with the body hunched forward, on the other hand, can imply that the person is bored or indifferent.

When you are trying to read body language, try to notice some of the signals that a person's posture can send.

- **Open posture** involves keeping the trunk of the body open and exposed. This type of posture indicates friendliness, openness, and willingness.¹¹
- **Closed posture** involves hiding the trunk of the body often by hunching forward and keeping the arms and legs crossed. This type of posture can be an indicator of hostility, unfriendliness, and anxiety.

Personal Space



Have you ever heard someone refer to their need for personal space? Have you ever started to feel uncomfortable when someone stands just a little too close to you?

The term proxemics, coined by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, refers to the distance between people as they interact. Just as body movements and facial expressions can communicate a great deal of nonverbal information, so can the physical space between individuals.

Hall described four levels of social distance that occur in different situations.

Intimate Distance: 6 to 18 inches

This level of physical distance often indicates a closer relationship or greater comfort between individuals. It usually occurs during intimate contact such as hugging, whispering, or touching.

Personal Distance: 1.5 to 4 feet

Physical distance at this level usually occurs between people who are family members or close friends. The closer the people can comfortably stand while interacting can be an indicator of the level of intimacy in their relationship.

Social Distance: 4 to 12 feet.

This level of physical distance is often used with individuals who are acquaintances.

With someone you know fairly well, such as a co-worker you see several times a week, you might feel more comfortable interacting at a closer distance.

In cases where you do not know the other person well, such as a postal delivery driver you only see once a month, a distance of 10 to 12 feet may feel more comfortable.

Public Distance: 12 to 25 feet

Physical distance at this level is often used in public speaking situations. Talking in front of a class full of students or giving a presentation at work are good examples of such situations.

It is also important to note that the level of personal distance that individuals need to feel comfortable can vary from culture to culture.

One oft-cited example is the difference between people from Latin cultures and those from North America. People from Latin countries tend to feel more comfortable standing closer to one another as they interact while those from North America need more personal distance.

A Word From Verywell

Understanding body language can go a long way toward helping you better communicate with others and interpreting what others might be trying to convey.

While it may be tempting to pick apart signals one by one, it's important to look at these nonverbal signals in relation to verbal communication, other nonverbal signals, and the situation.

You can also focus on learning more about how to improve your nonverbal communication to become better at letting people know what you are feeling—without even saying a word.

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