



Body Language

The importance of body language and how to read it...



? What's in this issue of Alex's Talkabout Tips?

Welcome to the fifth issue of Alex's Talkabout Tips! In this issue I am starting a new topic – body language – and I expect this topic will last for quite a few issues as there is quite a lot to say about it!

So, firstly, take a moment to look around the room, the train, the airport, the office... and look at someone's body language... look at their face, their eyes, the way they are sitting, the way their hands are moving... How do you think they are feeling? How do you know? Everyone you see is communicating something through their bodies, and if they are also talking, their body language may be agreeing with what they are saying, or it may be saying something different to their words.

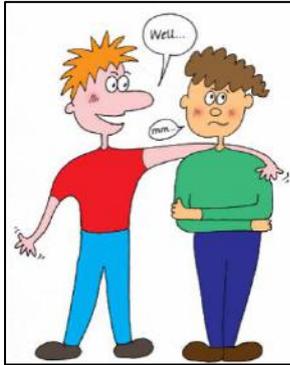
One of the reasons why this subject is so interesting is that our body language is totally unavoidable in the presence of others. Someone may choose to be silent, but they are still giving so many messages away to others. We just need to be able to read them.

Wouldn't we all like to know what someone *really* thinks? Or how they *really* feel? Wouldn't you just love to be good at mind-reading? Well, this is a good first step... as James Borg (2008) says: 'Body language is the window to a person's mind'.

I think I would like to guarantee that you will find this subject fascinating... but maybe I am biased! Let me know! So, let's start with a few basics.



Words versus Bodies...



Which do you believe more? Words or actions? If I say 'yes' to you but shake my head, what do you think I am really saying? If I say 'I love you' but my facial expression is wrong, do you believe me?

We have been taught that our words are really important, so choose them carefully. And of course, that is true. But it is our nonverbal communication that makes more of an impact on our listener.

In 1971 a professor called Albert Mehrabian conducted a study on the relative strengths of verbal and nonverbal messages in face-to-face encounters. He looked at where the impact came from: our body language, the way we speak, or our words. And he found that:

- 55% comes from the way we look – our body language.
- 38% comes from the way we sound – our nonverbal elements of our speech.
- 7% comes from our actual words.

That means that, at times, up to 93% of our message is conveyed through nonverbal behaviours.

Of course, some people wrongly conclude that our words therefore don't matter. That is not what he is saying. What this research shows us is that if our body language (the 55%) is not good, people don't tend to want to hear what we are saying. And if the way we sound (the 38%) is also not good, then our words become meaningless. So, we need to get the 93% right to make sure our words are listened to.

Think about first impressions, or just making a snap judgement on someone you already know... how quickly do you decide what is going on, whether they are trustworthy, likeable, telling the truth? First impressions are usually made within the first 7 seconds, but we do this split-second judgement regularly throughout the day to assess a situation. Malcolm Gladwell calls this 'thin-slicing' – the ability to process nonverbal information in the 'blink of an eye'.

This is because our nonverbal messages are constantly and powerfully communicating:

- Acceptance and rejection
- Liking and disliking
- Interest and boredom
- Truth and deception

Now this is useful! Wouldn't it be useful to be able to recognise if someone was lying, or how they were really feeling? What do we look for? I am going to give you 3 things to start with.



1. Context, congruence, and clusters

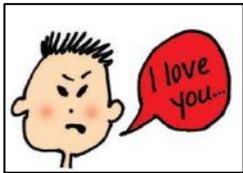
The first thing we are going to look for are the 3 Cs... context, congruence and clusters.

Context



Firstly, step back and consider the context. We may see someone sitting at a bus stop in a thin jacket on a cold day. She has her arms and legs crossed tightly, chin down, and a frown on her face. Is she feeling defensive, unreceptive or angry? No, she's cold.

Congruence



Secondly, look to see if the words match the actions. She says 'yes' but shakes her head. When someone's body language conflicts with what they are saying, then we should believe the nonverbal message. Some people call this 'synchrony' and a lack of synchrony between what is said and what is seen shows deceit or an alternative meaning behind the words.

Clusters



Thirdly, look for clusters of behaviours, because judging someone on one solitary behaviour can be a mistake. Think of body language as any other language – one gesture is a single word that only makes sense in the context of the sentence, or cluster of gestures. For example, scratching your head can mean several things, from dandruff to uncertainty, or forgetfulness to lying, and is dependent on the other gestures that are happening at the same time.

2. Open versus closed

The second thing we are going to notice is whether someone's body language is open or closed.

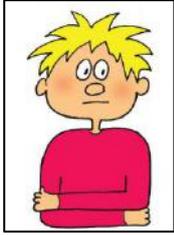
Open body language



Open body language is welcoming, relaxed, attentive. It indicates a lack of barriers – our body is open and exposed and we are vulnerable to others, and we are comfortable about it. Everything indicates a positive attitude. In short, the more confident and comfortable we are, the more we spread out.



Closed body language



Closed body language is a cluster of gestures, movements and posture that brings the body in on itself. We try to make our body appear smaller and we look for barriers to shield ourselves. We bring our limbs close to our body – we cross our arms and our legs, we avert our eyes. All this indicates a negative attitude – we feel uncomfortable or threatened. So in short, the less secure we feel, the less space we take up.

Power poses

Interestingly, not only does confidence result in an open posture, but having an open body language can also have a direct effect on our confidence and feelings of assertiveness. This means we can trick our bodies into feeling more assertive by posing in high power postures (The Wonder Woman pose), as this causes a rise in testosterone and a decrease in cortisol levels. This is a trick I have taught to many students who lack confidence in certain situations, and they all report it worked!

3. Emotional leakage

I do like this term, don't you? This is the third thing we are going to notice – all the little, subconscious movements that give away true emotions. They include facial expressions, gestures, posture and movements and we can divide them into displacement activities and self-comfort gestures.

Displacement activities



These are the things we do to displace anxiety or nervous energy. They are the little movements we do when we are experiencing any kind of inner conflict, which reveal our true feelings. Next time you are at an airport, look around at the things people do to disguise their anxiety – we may see constant checking of

tickets, making sure their wallet is where it was a minute ago, picking up and putting down their luggage, or repeatedly gazing at phones. We will also see self-comfort gestures.

Self-comfort gestures



These are displacement activities that are internally directed towards our own body. We see people touching their face, tugging at earlobes, clasping their hands together. We may even see people putting their fingers in their mouth – usually a sign that they are experiencing discomfort. Most of us have our own personal displacement habits – we may chew gum, bite our nails, eat, drink, fiddle with jewellery or keys. These



activities serve a purpose – they provide comfort and help to dissipate energy. But it is worth remembering that they also give the game away to anyone who knows how to read body language!

So, in summary...

So in this first issue about body language, I have talked about why it is important to understand what our body language is communicating and given you a few things to start looking out for. In the next issue, I will consider our hands and arms – what are they saying and what can we learn from them?

As always, this is just the essential bits! You can read more about all of this in my book 'Social Skills: developing effective interpersonal communication' (Kelly, 2019).

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Thanks for reading!



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