

# Interpreting Non-Verbal Communication in Your Relationship

## Objective

To improve your communication with your partner by increasing your understanding of body language.

## You Should Know

Although strong communication skills involve expressing yourself clearly and listening attentively, sometimes what you say does not always indicate what you actually mean or feel. It is the nonverbal communication of body language, that often 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 your partner understand your mood and intentions. When you pay attention to physical signals, you are less likely to project your own emotions onto your partner, or to misinterpret their feelings. This is especially helpful during conflict or challenging interactions when you might experience overwhelming thoughts and emotions.

By understanding body language—both your own and your partner’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.

Physical cues	Emotions
Eye contact or gazing into the eyes	Attention, caring, affection
Smiling, 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, freezing in place, sweating	Anxiety, nervousness, fear
Covering face, hiding, slumping, looking down or away.	Shame, embarrassment, guilt

## What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet for each partner. After you have both completed it, share your responses without judging or criticizing.

Write down any other expressions of body language you can think of and what emotions they convey.

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Think of a time that you realized your partner 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 your partner 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 nonverbal communication seems confusing or is difficult to interpret, there are some questions you can ask to get more clarity:

- "You look upset. Is everything all right?"
- "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 about your moods and feelings. Has your partner ever told you that your words did not match your body language? Explain.

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Think of a time when your partner seemed to understand that you were mad (or sad, anxious, and so on), 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 your partner. What happened? 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 you remember expressing.

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Describe your partner's facial expressions, posture, and movements.

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Describe how you interpreted your partner's emotions.

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

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

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Think of an upcoming situation where increasing your awareness of body language 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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## Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?

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