

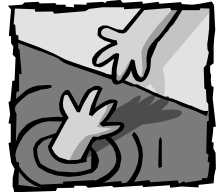
# THE GENERAL FEATURES OF BODY LANGUAGE

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Read the first half of this article. Do you understand the main points? Then tell or write your answers to these questions:

1. In a few sentences, define nonverbal body language.
2. What are some examples of easily-interpreted (universal) body signals? Why might these be misinterpreted at times?

Of course, the most important purpose of language is to express and communicate meaning effectively. Not only the *oral* language of words and sentences has this purpose, however. *Nonverbal* language gives information too. Especially, it expresses feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Another term for nonverbal expression and communication is "body language." Body language includes personal space and distance, body position in standing or sitting, body-part movements (of the feet, legs, trunk, shoulders, neck, head, etc.), arm and hand gestures, and facial expressions. All of these features can have meaning—either intended or unintended. They can lead to better understanding or to miscommunication.

Some "body language" is universal. Often, people express basic emotions like hunger, fatigue, love, anger, or fear nonverbally. Almost everyone understands the expression of such feelings without words. If we are paying attention, we know if someone is too hot (sweating) or too cold (shivering). An emaciated person begging for food is very hungry or even starving. Hard breathing and trembling often indicate fear. Nodding off with closed eyelids probably means exhaustion or sleepiness. There are many unconscious or natural body signals that people worldwide can interpret without much knowledge of the culture.



On the other hand, even basic emotions might be expressed differently in diverse cultures or countries. For example, North Americans usually associate smiling with cheerfulness, friendliness, or amusement. Some Asians, on the other hand, may smile or giggle when they feel uncomfortable or confused. In North America, exuberant laughter usually comes from someone that is feeling happy or joyous. But in other cultures, laughing loudly may brand someone as rude or boorish. In most of the world, crying generally indicates sadness or pain. At times, however, tears can be signals of deeply-felt *positive* emotions, such as love or understanding or joy. Even signals of emergencies, such as choking or a heart attack, can be misinterpreted by members of other cultural groups.

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*INSTRUCTIONS, CONTINUED:* Read the second half of the article. Tell or write your answers to these questions. Then give your opinions and ideas.

3. What are three very general aspects of body language that may lead to cultural understanding or misunderstanding?
4. What are the North American “norms” of personal space and distance, touching, eye contact, and amount of movement and gesturing in social interaction? Compare these norms to the “rules” and customs of other cultures.

**H**ow can we observe, understand, or analyze body language? One way is to begin with the most general features. Some general aspects of nonverbal communication are: (a) the use of space, distance, and touch (b) eye contact or lack of it, and (c) the amount of animation (movement, gestures, and facial expressions). Culture influences all of these features, so misunderstandings among people of varied backgrounds can easily arise. Examples follow.

In personal interaction, North Americans generally prefer more space than do people from Mediterranean and Latin cultures. When talking with someone from Greece, for instance, an American might back away to keep “normal” conversational distance. In contrast, the same American might move closer and closer to someone from an Asian culture, who is feeling uncomfortable at the American’s brash “aggressiveness.” Similarly, in casual social interaction Americans tend to touch one another less than Southern Europeans, Africans, or Latin Americans might—but more than people from some Asian cultures.

In American culture, most people expect others to “look them in the eye” during an interaction. Why do they tend to distrust someone that avoids eye contact? Because they perceive that person as dishonest, evasive, uninvolved, or simply disinterested in them or the subject. On the other hand, intense staring makes Americans uncomfortable too. Subconsciously, others may interpret staring as a threat, an uninvited challenge, or an expression of anger.

To members of the quieter or more modest cultures, the amount of movement or animation displayed by people of other backgrounds can create discomfort. For instance, a typical American way of walking may give the impression of arrogance. Some Italians or Greeks or Hispanics might raise their elbows above the shoulders while talking, and others may interpret their movements as emotionalism or a hot temper. Why might someone find Chinese or Japanese people “cold,” “rigid,” or very polite and formal? Because Asians tend to keep their hands and arms still. They don’t usually show much emotion in their faces, either.

The body language of various cultures may be quite similar—or very different in its meaning and messages.



# SOME UNIVERSAL EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTION

**INSTRUCTIONS:** The meanings of some kinds of body language are easily understood by people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In cartoons, here are 27 examples.

1. In a word or phrase, tell what emotion or feeling each picture represents. Here is some vocabulary to choose from, but use your own ideas too.
2. Tell the reasons for each of your answers. Describe the facial expressions, movements, gestures, and other feeling symbols from the cartoon.

- affection    • desperation    • frustration    • surprise
- anxiety    • embarrassment    • impatience    • sleeplessness
- anger    • excitement    • joy    • thoughtfulness
- comfort    • exhaustion    • love    • warmth
- confusion    • fear    • shock    • worry

3. Can you draw simple cartoons to show universal feelings and emotions? If you can, do so. Show your drawings to others. Can they interpret your artwork correctly? If not, tell a classmate how to pantomime (act out) each emotion. Describe the facial expressions, movements, and gestures in detail.



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