

# Why Body Language Matters

*Speak To Your Patients Without Saying a Word*

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*Body Language . . . buyer be ware . . .*

*Many of you have either seen or heard about the findings described in the pie chart to your right (Mehrabian, 1971). On the face of it, it would seem as though the results of the study are pretty compelling . . . but are they?*

*Stay tuned for the answer . . .*

*Meanwhile, this presentation will attempt to help you:*

- 1. Understand the kinds of roles body language can play in the medical profession;*
- 2. Recognize basic elements of body language and how to combine them to create meaning*
- 3. Identify shortcuts for using body language effectively*

## **How Important Is Body Language?**

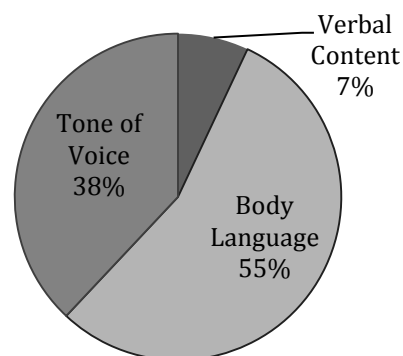
*Very important, but not necessarily for the reasons you may think.*

*Body language can help us . . .*

- Communicate*
  - Conveying information about the content of our discussion*
  - Establishing competence, credibility, & leadership qualities in the eyes others*
  - Setting limits and establishing boundaries with others*
- Enhance & Engage*
  - Capturing & maintaining our audience's attention*
  - Emphasizing & embellishing the content of our messages*
- Conceptualize & problem-solve*

## **Fact or Fiction?**

*Body Language's Contribution To the Communication Process*



- Acting as cues or props that facilitate our ability to think things through
- Influence how we feel & what we do \*\*\*
  - Impacting the way we feel about ourselves & how others feel about us
  - Influencing our behavior and willingness to act or not act in certain situations
  - Triggering physical changes in our bodies.

## What is exactly is body language? . . . . .

The definition listed below incorporates the broad range of things we do with our bodies that influence the communication process, and while the definition may justifiably make some body language researchers cringe, it's nonetheless a good starting place for understanding the multiple ways our bodies can be used to communicate.

*Any observable physiological change in our body and/or its movement, conscious or not, that generates meaning for either us, the people around us, or both.*

This definition encompasses anything from muscle tension, perspiration and nervous ticks to posture, facial expressions, and “emblematic gestures” (gestures that act as symbols conveying specific meaning, like the peace sign or the hand signal for “OK”). According to this definition, the term “body language” refers to everything we do with our bodies from the way we walk, sit, and stand to how we hold a cup of coffee, gaze out the window, or turn the pages of a book. Blushing, slumping and frowning would all be considered examples of body language whether we are aware that we’re doing these things or not. What’s more, according to this definition the impact of our body language is felt not only by others, but also by ourselves—that is, in addition to the way our body language affects others, our own body language affects the way we feel about ourselves.

Note, that while this definition cuts a pretty broad swath and includes things like micro expressions (brief momentary emotional facial expressions) and reflexes, it does not include actions or behaviors like running a race or buying a car, but rather the body language you might use (e.g., posture, facial expressions, muscle tension) while doing those things.

## Elements of Body Language . . .

There are any number of ways to organize the components that transform the things we do with our bodies into a language. For simplicity sake and for ease of presentation, I'm narrowing them down into two major groups: 1) types of body language and 2) variations in the way we use body language.

### Types of Body Language

- Posture & position
- Facial expressions
- Our Eyes (eye contact, pupil dilation, blink patterns, gaze]
- Gestures which can consist of
  - Reflex actions
  - Emblems
  - Embellishments
  - Problem-solving aides
- Gray areas (things that have more of a behavioral feel than a body language feel, but people often lump with body language because they're non-verbal
  - Proxemics
  - Touch
  - Movement (e.g., walking or pacing versus standing still]

### Variations in Delivery

- Size/range of movements
- Muscle tone
- Motion . . .
  - Speed
  - Rhythm
  - Smoothness
  - Direction
- Timing
- Open versus closed

### Putting It All Together

Now for the hard part---putting it all together.

Learning to speak with your body is like learning to speak a foreign language. There are a lot of moving parts and things to consider. Your job is to organize those parts in ways that convey meaning for both you and the people around you; knowing that, just as with the spoken word, using or interpreting a single

element of body language out of context can be misleading. That brings to the next important point, gesture clusters.

*Gesture Clusters.* Gesture clusters are groups of gestures or body language elements that combine to create meaning, much like words in a sentence combine to express thought.

Attributing meaning to individual body language elements independent of their context is a lot like assigning meaning to words in the spoken language (e.g., red versus read) without knowing how they're being used—that is, a recipe for misunderstanding.

Nevertheless, it's common to find body language “experts” making sweeping judgements about the meaning of individual body language elements (e.g., the direction a woman points the toes of her shoes, the intention of a man who crosses his arms, or the emotional state of a person who furrowed his brow) without regard to the broader context of what is happening around those movements. And while there will most assuredly be times when interpretations of individual body language elements by so called “experts” are right, there will also be times when people hearing the isolated word “read” picture a book in lieu of a color; but that doesn't that using individual words out of context is good practice. When push comes to shove, the more body language elements you have to help you use to convey and understand meaning of what is being said, the more accurate your communication is likely to be.

In summary:

- Choose elements that convey the meaning we want to express.
- Package them in ways that enhance the message you want people to hear.
- Focus on clusters of elements, rather than a single element on its own, particularly when you're evaluating the body language of others
- Consider the context of the communication

## **Tips & Tricks . . .**

Now for a few tips and tricks people have found particularly helpful over the years.

**Resistance Training . . .** A simple way to give your gestures a bit more zing is to practice “resistance training.” By that I mean tensing your hand or whatever appendage you're using to gesture and moving it as though you were pushing up against an object or pulling something toward you, creating muscle tension in your movements that makes your gestures appear stronger.

**Soften** ... Popularized in his book *Making Contact*, Arthur Wassmer describes things we can do to SOFTEN our physical presentation in ways that make us more accessible to others.

SOFTEN stands for . . .

- S -- Smile
- O -- Open posture
- F -- Forward lean
- T -- Touch
- E -- Eye contact
- N -- Nod

**Mirroring** ... Mirroring (i.e., mimicking the posture, facial expressions, and gestures of others) is one way to help the people around you relate to and feel comfortable with you.

**Modeling** ... Modeling provides a way to you use your own body language to set the tone of an interaction by getting other people to mirror you. It's a great way to gradually introduce more energy into a room that feels "depressed" or to slowly settle down an agitated situation by gradually shifting your own reactions.

### **The Short Cuts** . . . Chunking, Adopt a Role, Make Friends with a Horse & Presence

The following shortcuts provide strategies for organizing body language elements in ways that make them more accessible and easier to use when you need them most.

#### Chunking

While gestures clusters tend to occur in natural groups based on the context of a situation, there's no reason you can't create clusters of gestures designed specifically to help you navigate the kinds of situations you typically encounter. They don't have to be elaborate, just detailed enough to bring together groups of gestures you would otherwise have had to call up from memory one by one.

The process of chunking gesture clusters is a lot like learning the steps to new dance, but instead of assembling and combining groups of individual steps to create new ways of moving, your job is to identify and combine body language elements to create chunks of clusters you can call on when we need them. Then just as we would if we learning a new dance, practice those clusters until they become second nature.

## Adopt A Role

Another way to access gestures clusters is to adopt the role of a behavior that's already a part of your repertoire and use what you already know about being in that role to guide your body language. Let me explain . . .

Let's say you want to enter a room with a welcoming upbeat manner, smile, shake hands, lean forward, nod to show interest, touch appropriately, mirror a patient's body language, and leave whatever tension you may have felt before entering the room at the door. That's a lot to remember when your prime objective is to assess, diagnose, and treat a patient in a few short minutes.

But let's say you stop, take a deep breath, and adopt the role of a host before entering the room. To the extent you're able to embody the host role while doing your job, odds are your memories of host-like behavior will kick in and you'll find yourself doing the things you hoped to do before, only now you're doing them as a host, without giving them a second thought—i.e., welcoming your patients in an upbeat manner, smiling, shaking hands, and drawing reservoir of host-like behavior you might not otherwise have thought to consider.

I don't know about you, but for me, it's a whole lot easier to adopt a role I'm familiar with than to perform a series of independent activities I have to remember one by one in addition to whatever else I'm supposed to do for my job.

But why stop with one role? Why not pick and choose the role that suits you and your circumstances best? Why not consider being a benevolent expert, an enforcer (yes, there are times when being an enforcer is a good thing), a coach, a healer, a mentor, or any other role that embodies the experience you want to create in your patients?

## Make Friends With A Horse

I know this may sound a little strange, but one of the most promising bedside manner training models I've come across comes from a very unlikely source—an Equine Assisted Learning Program (EAL) designed specifically for medical professionals. But it makes sense. What better way to teach medical professionals (or anyone for that matter) good body language bedside manner than a program that doesn't use words?

Undoubtedly this program and programs like it aren't right for everyone and are likely to only be as good as the individual trainers who offer them. Even so, the premise behind the programs is compelling.

By taking participants outside of their comfort zone and challenging them to use communication skills in ways that are unfamiliar, these programs challenge participants to stay present, focus on the “patient,” engage in patient centered interactions, and lead in non-intrusive ways. What’s more, because they’re both experiential and off the beaten track, they represent a kind of learning that’s likely to be deeper and more memorable than most.

Check out the link below, scroll down to the paragraph starting with “Can Doctors Learn Better Bedside Manner from . . .” and click on the link that says “HERE.” I think you’ll see what I mean.

<http://ypingreinsofhope.com/eal/medWheel.php>

### Be Present

Being present is a role unto itself. As a role, it means entering a room with enough confidence and self-assurance that your attention is free to focus on the wants and needs of others instead of focusing on yourself. Obviously, it’s not the kind of thing many of us can learn to do overnight and most definitely requires a level of self-awareness that takes time to develop, but for those of you who are already on a mindfulness learning track or have achieved a level of self-assurance that enables you to focus on things that are happening in the moment, it offers additional role to consider.

### **The Pie Chart Revealed: Consistency Rules . . .**

Remember the pie chart I showed you at the beginning of this presentation? The one that said 7% of communication is attributable to verbal content, 38% to tone of voice, and 55% to body language?

If you believed these findings were compelling, you wouldn’t have been alone. At first blush, these figures led many to believe a person’s body language and tone of voice contribute more to the meaning of a message than the words they say—a statement that is definitely true under a specific set of circumstances. But as Mehrabian (1971) has been quick to point out, his findings have been misinterpreted are limited to emotionally charged situations when our body language and tone of voice convey different meanings than the ones we express with our words.

Simply put, when mismatched messages are in play, it pays to look beyond a person’s words to their body language and tone of voice to decipher the real meaning of what is being said. But even when people’s emotions are consistent with the things they say, body language can still make a significant

contribution to the communication process—impacting our credibility with others, holding our audience's attention, helping us think problems through, and more. It's just that that's not what the Mehrabian study was about.

### **Parting Words . . .**

1. Body language is a language like any other language. It takes a time to learn to speak it well; but once you do, it almost always makes communication easier and much more effective.
2. While you can learn body language piece by piece, adopting personas that draw on existing skills sets is a great way to fast-forward your learning.
3. Like the spoken word, it's easy to get the wrong idea if you take elements of body language out of context. Focus on context and clusters of gestures to help you understand what a particular gesture means.
4. Be sensitive to cultural differences in the meaning of emblems and certain kinds of gestures.
5. Body language is the often overlooked physiological equivalent of verbal self-talk. Use it to help direct what you think, how you feel, and what you want to do.
6. One size does not fit all. Different settings and applications benefit from different approaches to body language.
7. Build on what you know whenever possible.
8. Be yourself. Focus on learning body language that helps you come across on the outside the way you feel (or want to feel) on the inside.



## Suggested Readings & Videos. . . . .

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