The Ultimate Guide to Body Language

From your head to your toes, how to code and decode unconscious cues

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We spend our lives learning how to decode other people's nonverbal cues.  While we’re busy trying to decode their messages, they are also trying to decode ours.  There are times when you want other people to know exactly how you’re feeling, especially when those feelings are both positive and reciprocated.  This isn’t always easy to do, especially if you’re not a particularly emotive type of person. At other times, however, you definitely want to hide your inner feelings. To avoid emotional leakage, you may have to work doubly hard. Depending on the situation, you may need to put on your Lady Gaga-style poker face.

Body language is, just that, the language of the body. You may think that you only show your emotions through your face, but that is- quite literally- only the tip of the iceberg. Your entire body participates in the business of either showing or hiding your mental state. To control that display means you have to control your body's [unconscious](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/unconscious) cues.  This guide will show you how, starting from the top down. By the time you’re done, you’ll have a much greater [understanding](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) of the role that even the seemingly most insignificant bodily gesture can provide key signals of your emotions.

Bottom of Form

**Your Head**

Starting at the very top of your head is, of course, your scalp.  Your hair (assuming you have it) actually tells a great deal about your emotional state.  People have bad hair days for many reasons, but depending on the type of bad hair day it is, the reason might be your mood as much as it is the weather. When you’re stressed, for example, you may even forget to run a comb through your frazzled locks. People will know at a glance that you’re not feeling completely pulled together. Similarly, a bed head after a long night out may be sexy to some, but it’s not the look you want to cultivate to impress at the office or your kid’s PTA meeting.   Cut, color, or amount of hair aside, the fact that it’s groomed lets others know that you’re in control of the way your day is developing. If you don't have any hair, the problem is solved, but with your forehead more in evidence, you'll be giving away other nonverbal cues when you're frowning.

There’s not much you can do to change the way your permanent facial features communicate your feelings—your nose just is what it is.  However, the parts of your face that reflect what psychologists call[display rules](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201205/how-guide-boosting-your-mind-reading-powers) play a vital role in letting others know exactly how you’re feeling and maybe even exactly what you’re thinking.  The most important of these are the tiniest movements involving the muscles around your eyes and mouth, called “microexpressions.”  One reason they are so important to understanding body language is because they can completely contradict the impression you’re trying to create by what you're saying. You may want to hide the feelings of [fear](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear) that you have when talking to someone you want to impress, but the little pulling back of the muscles around your mouth shows instead that you’re panicking on the inside (make a grimace now and you’ll know what I mean).



While you’re grimacing, pay attention to what’s happening to your forehead (bald people: take note!). You’re probably raising your eyebrows, another cue to the discomfort you’re feeling. See the picture of German Chancellor Angela Merkel for an excellent example. People don’t just show[microexpressions](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/body-language) of fear when they’re afraid; they also do so when they’re [lying](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/deception). So if you’re trying to hide a little white lie, make sure you control those little facial muscles too. I’m not advising that you *do*lie, but just telling you that if you've got no other choice, you’ll have to stop that mini-grimace from appearing. Convince yourself that you truly like your best friend's new hairdo even if you think it's hideous, and your compliment will seem sincere.

Your eyes also communicate many important cues to your inner state. Most importantly, you need to strike the right balance between too much and too little staring at the people to whom you’re speaking. Too much and you can make the other person uncomfortable; too little and you’ll seem disinterested.  You also want to avoid making superfluous insulting gestures such as the sarcastic eye roll, even if you think you won’t be detected.

On the positive side, there’s nothing quite like a friendly twinkle in the eyes to put other people at ease and take an immediate [liking](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201206/9-ways-win-fans-and-influence-people) to you.  Again, this doesn’t need to be over the top, nor should the eye twinkle be brought out at solemn occasions. Under ordinary circumstances, however, a twinkle can break the ice, make you appear to be a welcoming person, and give others a cue to the fascinating wit that lurks within you. Be careful, though, that you don't go so far as to wink. Remember the disastrous results that Sarah Palin suffered after her wink-embellished debate performances.

It’s getting time to move on to the rest of the body, but before I do, I just need to mention the chin and neck.  I’ve never completely understood how stubbornness could be interpreted from the shape of the chin given that it’s a fixed facial structure. However, if you habitually jut it out in front of you, it’s possible that people will assume that you’re somewhat obstinate, so just avoid doing that. Your neck, similarly, is a fixed bodily feature, but the way you use it to hold up your head is very un-fixed.  Use your neck to hold your head straight helps to keep your eyes in front of you rather than staring at the floor or ceiling (which are bad body language signals), and you'll look poised and self-confident.

**Your Torso**

With your neck holding your head high, you’ll also be more likely to align your posture. Keep your back straight and your shoulders from lurching forward to add to the impression that you’re confident and in control of your feelings. On the other hand, if you want to appeal to someone’s sympathetic side, you can sag a little all around, because you will look more in need of help. A chronic sagging posture, though, tells other people that you don’t feel very good about yourself.  As an aside, over time, that slumping will lead you to develop [health](http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/161206) problems. Those admonitions from your elders when you were growing up to "stand up straight" were right! But for the moment, keep yourself upright, but not ramrod stiff, and you let the world know that you feel comfortable in your body and, by extrapolation, good about yourself.

Attached to your upper torso are, of course, your arms and hands.  These upper limbs provide many opportunities for body language failures if you’re not careful.  You communicate anxiety or boredom when your hands fidget and [anger](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger) when you cross your arms tightly. If you place your arms akimbo, you can unintentionally look arrogant. Of course, if you want to look angry or arrogant, these are great ways to communicate those feelings.  If you’d rather not, then find some neutral way to keep your hands and arms from getting in the way of the positive impression you want to make. I was once told by a very accomplished colleague that the best thing to do with your hands, while you’re sitting, is to hold them in your lap- not clutch- but gently hold together. The folded hands also keep you from over-gesticulating, another body language trap that can cause your feelings to spill out by the gallon. When you’re standing, you need to find a similarly neutral way of letting your hands rest comfortably either at your sides or on some other convenient resting place.

**Your Legs**

Now onto the lower limbs. When you’re in full view of someone else, whether sitting or standing, you’re giving away a wide array of important cues with the body language of your legs. Tightly crossing them while you’re sitting in a chair presents a “closed” view of yourself to others, as if you’re trying to build a mini-fortress around yourself. Splaying them out carelessly in front of you sends just the opposite message. You want to seem open, relaxed, and comfortable, but not so much that you look sloppy and so relaxed that you’re ready to fall asleep. Women wearing skirts have obvious reasons to pay attention to the way they hold their legs.  In fact, if you happen to be wearing a skirt that’s too short, you probably will feel a bit awkward and nervous about a wardrobe malfunction. That anxiety will spill over to the rest of your body language, causing the situation to rapidly deteriorate as others will certainly notice your grave discomfort.

Anxiety can translate very directly into an unconscious leg-shaking (or foot-tapping, which I’ll get to shortly). People with jittery legs apparently burn off more calories, but there are definitely better ways to work off those extra pounds, at least when you're in public situations.  Shaking your legs while sitting sends a giant message to everyone around you about your inner feelings of anxiety or irritation or both. Your legs are the largest area of your body, so when they move, it’s pretty hard for others not to notice.  You can cure yourself of this [bad habit](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201206/put-your-habits-work-you) by replacing the shaking motion with another action that will simultaneously calm you down.  Crossing your legs at the ankles is the equivalent to folding your hands in your lap and doing both at the same time will greatly settle your feelings while it ramps up your poise factor.

**Your Feet**

I said head-to-toe and that’s where we are going to end this tour of your body language cues. As I indicated above, shaking your legs communicates anxiety, and when you shake those legs you inevitably shake those feet.  However, your feet can get you into trouble with your body language all on their own. Tapping your toes is one way to show that you’re in a hurry and anxious to get moving.  You may want to tap your toes if you’re trying to get someone’s attention and don’t want to say something rude. It’s a little way of signaling that you’re feeling time pressured without yelling or engaging in sarcastic eye-rolling. However, you do so at a risk. Either you’ll be ignored or still perceived as rude. Better to handle your feelings of annoyance over being made to wait by politely voicing your concerns.

Your feet also communicate confidence or fear by the way they move you from place to place.  Your stride should be strong and your gait as steady as you can manage, depending on your age and health. When you practice good posture, it will be easier to walk in a self-confident manner. On the other hand, slouching, slumping, or skulking makes you seem afraid of where you’re heading. You’re giving off the unconscious cues by doing so that you fear the direction you’re taking.   Wearing the right shoes can help cinch the deal. Flip-flops, 4-inch stilettos, or shoes that just plain don’t fit can cause you to teeter or, worse, fall. It’s [hard to recover your self-composure](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201109/five-step-guide-preventing-those-oops-moments) after taking an embarrassing tumble.

**To Sum It All Up**

This head-to-toe guide should give you plenty to work on if you’d like to improve the image you project to others, especially employers you’re[trying to impress](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201101/selling-it-making-interviews-work-you) or potential partners you’d like to date. To seal the deal, take the ultimate – but most challenging- step. Instead of using your phone just to catch videos of cute pet tricks to post on YouTube, turn it on you and record yourself doing ordinary everyday activities. You’ll be able to diagnose the characteristic bodily language cues that convey too much, too little, or just the wrong message about how you’re feeling. Partner up with a friend or loved one and review the videos, looking for the cues that you most need to work on improving. Counseling psychologist and former University of Massachusetts professor [Alan Ivey](http://www.emicrotraining.com/resources.php?rPath=4) pioneered the method of **microtraining** to help counselors improve the way they communicate to their clients.  To benefit the most from this type of body language re-education process do so in a non-critical or judgmental fashion. You don't want to make yourself feel worse about your body language, you just need to find ways to control it.

Your body’s actions, consciously and unconsciously, reflect your mental state.  Learning to control the cues you communicate to others will invariably boost not only the way you look, but the way you feel. **Copyright Susan Krauss Whitbourne 2012**