

Body Language For Everyone

Introduction

Body language is a powerful concept which successful people tend to understand well.

The study and theory of body language has become popular in recent years because psychologists have been able to understand what we 'say' through our bodily gestures and facial expressions, so as to translate our body language, revealing its underlying feelings and attitudes.

Body Language is also referred to as 'non-verbal communications', and less commonly 'non-vocal communications'.

The term 'non-verbal communications' tends to be used in a wider sense, and all these terms are somewhat vague.

For the purposes of this article, the terms 'body language' and 'non-verbal communications' are broadly interchangeable. This guide also takes the view that body language/non-verbal communications is the study of how people communicate face-to-face aside from the spoken words themselves, and in this respect the treatment of the subject here is broader than typical body language guides limited merely to body positions and gestures.

If you carry out any serious analysis or discussion you should clarify the terminology in your own way to suit your purposes.

For example:

Does body language include facial expression and eye movement? - Usually, yes.

What about breathing and perspiration? - This depends on your definition of body language.

And while tone and pitch of voice are part of verbal signals, are these part of body language too? - Not normally, but arguably so, especially as you could ignore them if considering only the spoken words and physical gestures/expressions.

There are no absolute right/wrong answers to these questions. It's a matter of interpretation.

A good reason for broadening the scope of body language is to avoid missing important signals which might not be considered within a narrow definition of body language.

Nevertheless, confusion easily arises if definitions and context are not properly established, for example:

It is commonly and carelessly quoted that 'non-verbal communications' and/or 'body language' account for up to 93% of the meaning that people take from any human communication. This statistic is actually a distortion based on [Albert Mehrabian's research theory](#), which while itself is something of a cornerstone of body language research, certainly did not make such a sweeping claim.

Mehrabian's research findings in fact focused on communications with a strong emotional or 'feelings' element. Moreover the 93% non-verbal proportion included vocal intonation (paralinguistic), which are regarded by many as falling outside of the body language definition.

Care must therefore be exercised when stating specific figures relating to percentages of meaning conveyed, or in making any firm claims in relation to body language and non-verbal communications.

It is safe to say that body language represents a very significant proportion of meaning that is conveyed and interpreted between people. Many body language experts and sources seem to agree that that between 50-80% of all human communications are non-verbal. So, while body language statistics vary according to situation, it is generally accepted that non-verbal communications are very important in how we understand each other (or fail to), especially in face-to-face and one-to-one communications, and most definitely when the communications involve an emotional or attitudinal element.

Body language is especially crucial when we meet someone for the first time.

We form our opinions of someone we meet for the first time in just a few seconds, and this initial instinctual assessment is based far more on what we see and feel about the other person than on the words they speak. On many occasions we form a strong view about a new person before they speak a single word.

Consequently, body language is very influential in forming impressions on first meeting someone.

The effect happens both ways - to and from:

- When we meet someone for the first time, their body language, on conscious and unconscious levels, largely determines our initial impression of them.
- In turn when someone meets us for the first time, they form their initial impression of us largely from our body language and non-verbal signals.

And this two-way effect of body language continues throughout communications and relationships between people.

Body language is constantly being exchanged and interpreted between people, even though much of the time this is happening on an unconscious level.

Remember - while you are interpreting (consciously or unconsciously) the body language of other people, so other people are constantly interpreting yours.

The people with the most conscious awareness of, and capabilities to read, body language tend to have an advantage over those whose appreciation is limited largely to the unconscious.

You will shift your own awareness of body language from the unconscious into the conscious by learning about the subject, and then by practicing your reading of non-verbal communications in your dealings with others.

Body language is more than body positions and movements

Body language is not just about how we hold and move our bodies.

Body language potentially (although not always, depending on the definition you choose to apply) encompasses:

- how we position our bodies
- our closeness to and the space between us and other people (proxemics), and how this change
- our facial expressions
- our eyes especially and how our eyes move and focus, etc.
- how we touch ourselves and others
- how our bodies connect with other non-bodily things, for instance, pens, cigarettes, spectacles and clothing
- our breathing, and other less noticeable physical effects, for example our heartbeat and perspiration

Body language tends not to include:

- the pace, pitch, and intonation, volume, variation, pauses, etc., of our voice.

Arguably this last point should be encompassed by body language, because a lot happens here which can easily be missed if we consider merely the spoken word and the traditional narrow definition of body language or non-verbal communications.

Voice type and other audible signals are typically not included in body language because they are audible 'verbal' signals rather than physical visual ones, nevertheless the way the voice is used is a very significant (usually unconscious) aspect of communication, aside from the bare words themselves.

Consequently, voice type is always important to consider alongside the usual body language factors.

Similarly breathing and heartbeat, etc., are typically excluded from many general descriptions of body language but are certainly part of the range of non-verbal bodily actions and signals which contribute to body language in its fullest sense.

More obviously, our [eyes](#) are a vital aspect of our body language.

Our reactions to other people's eyes - movement, focus, expression, etc. - and their reactions to our eyes - contribute greatly to mutual assessment and understanding, consciously and unconsciously.

With no words at all, massive feeling can be conveyed in a single glance. The metaphor which describes the eyes of two lovers meeting across a crowded room is not only found in old romantic movies. It's based on scientific fact - the strong powers of non-verbal communications.

These effects - and similar powerful examples - have existed in real human experience and behavior for thousands of years.

The human body and our instinctive reactions have evolved to an amazingly clever degree, which many of us ignore or take for granted, and which we can all learn how to recognize more clearly if we try.

Our interpretation of body language, notably eyes and facial expressions, is instinctive, and with a little thought and knowledge we can significantly increase our conscious awareness of these signals: both the signals we transmit, and the signals in others that we observe.

Doing so gives us a significant advantage in life - professionally and personally - in our dealings with others.

Body language is not just reading the signals in other people.

Importantly, understanding body language enables better self-awareness and self-control too.

We understand more about other people's feelings and meanings, and we also understand more about these things in ourselves. When we understand body language we become better able to refine and improve what our body says about us, which generates a positive improvement in the way we feel, the way we perform, and what we achieve.

Definition of Body Language

Body language is the unconscious and conscious transmission and interpretation of feelings, attitudes, and moods, through:

- **body posture, movement, physical state, position and relationship to other bodies, objects and surroundings,**
 - **facial expression and eye movement,**
- (and this transmission and interpretation can be quite different to the spoken words).**

Words alone - especially emotional words (or words used in emotional situations) - rarely reflect full or true meaning and motive.

We find clues to additional or true meaning in body language.

Being able to 'read' body language therefore helps us greatly:

- to know how people feel and what they mean, and
- to understand better how people might be perceiving our own non-verbal signals, and (often overlooked)
- to understand ourselves better, deeper than the words we hear ourselves saying.