

The Paralanguage of Behavior

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There are two channels for transmitting information: verbally and nonverbally; each source is better at conveying certain types of messages. Words are best for communicating factual information. If you are trying to share with someone the title of a book, the price of an article, or the essence of a philosophy school, it is much better to use words.

Words are also used to describe emotions and are typically used in combination with the body language to undertake such a purpose. However, in the emotional domain the advantage is with the body language. In a very interesting book, “Unmasking the Face: A Guide to Recognizing Emotions from Facial Cues,” Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen show how the rapid facial signals are the primary system for expressing emotions. It is the face you search to know whether someone is angry, disgusted, afraid, and sad or weary. Words cannot always describe the feelings people have. Often words are not adequate to express what you see in the book of someone’s face at an emotional moment.

Nonverbal expressions portray a person’s feelings and give fair indication of how the person is coping with his/her emotions. For example, the expression on the man’s face may indicate that he is angry. The rest of the body shows what he is doing with those angry feelings. A person may approach others with menacing posture and clench fist, ready for combat. On the other hand, he may try to repress the anger through muscular tension. Again, he may vent his feelings by stamping his feet, flailing his arms, slamming the door and so on.

The point is that you can gain valuable insight into what a person is doing with his/her feelings by watching the body language!

People’s feelings about their relationships are primarily communicated through their nonverbal expression. When people position themselves at a considerable distance from each other, tense their bodies, and avoid facing each other and making eye contact, the relationship probably is not very strong or healthy.

In the very famous book “The Skilled Helper: A Model for Systematic Helping and Interpersonal Relating,” Gerald Egan alert us that the averted face may mean an averted heart.

Any conversation is rich in nonverbal expression. Of course, the content of the dialogue is very important, but when emotions are strongly engaged they should receive primary attention. Since nonverbal expressions are the primary means for communicating emotions, they are central to understanding many of the most important things that others communicate to us. Recently, I was delighted when my daughter slowly put her head in my shoulder while we were in church one Sunday morning... The language of that feeling was very clear to me and to others observing her body language. The same thing happened when my son gave me a big kiss and a huge hug before departing to Washington DC, or when my wife gave me a love look before I was going to catch a plane for The States.

There are times when each of us uses words to hide feelings! Whether consciously or unconsciously, we try to control the expression of emotions that are communicated nonverbally.

We may shrug our shoulders to feigned indifference when in fact the issue is very important to us. We may camouflage anger with a false smile. We may put a “poker face” to cover emotions that we are experiencing.

We humans try to mask our feelings with deceptive body language. The thing is that even if we are determined not to show emotions in our body language, our true feelings usually leak past the attempt at control, though sometimes only for a fleeting moment.

The observation of the body language is very important to an effective listener and analyst because it communicates what it is most important to the speaker. When a person is reluctant to express his/her feelings in words, or is unable to find the right phrases to describe his/her emotions, or has repressed his/her feelings to the extent that he/she is not consciously aware of his/her feelings, in each of these situations, the person’s nonverbal expressions usually indicate the person’s true feelings!

Sigmund Freud said that self-betrayal oozes from all our pores.

Researchers have provided clear guidelines to become more effective in responding to our silent language or the language of behavior.

1. Make a conscious effort to focus your attention on the cues that are more evident or helpful.
2. See each of the nonverbal expressions in proper context.
3. Note incongruities when they exist.
4. Increase awareness of your own feelings about the interactions with other people.
5. Reflect your understanding back to others for confirmation or correction.

In “Developing Skills in Contact Counseling,” Dr. Len Spentry suggests that the following voice characteristics (technically called paralanguage) are likely to have the following meanings:

Paralanguage

Feeling Meaning

Monotone voice
Slow speed, low pitch
High voice, emphatic pitch
Ascending tone
Abrupt speech
Tense speech, loud tone
High pitch, drawn-out speech

Boredom
Depression
Enthusiasm
Astonishment
Defensiveness
Anger
Disbelief

When we concentrate in understanding the language behavior of people, communication can be improved.

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