

Body Language

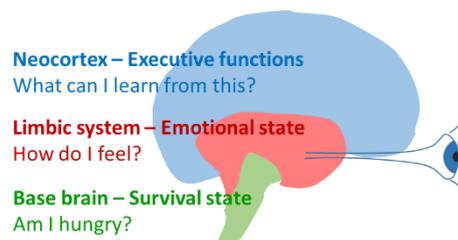
When humans communicate, they use both facts and emotions. The facts are carried by words. The emotions are carried in the choice of words, how we say those words (tone, volume etc.) and how we act while communicating. These notes are dedicated to body language ... the non-verbal component of communication.

Where does body language originate?

These notes are based on the premises that body language is controlled by the brain. There are exceptions

- ⇒ Reflexes ... i.e. if your hand touches something unexpectedly burning hot then you will jerk it into safety, long before the 'BURN!!!' signal reaches the brain, is processed, and the command is sent back to the arm muscles to move the hand... your brain is too slow!
- ⇒ Some movements that happen without the brain being needed to manage the movement ... i.e. your heart will continue to beat even if it is separated from the brain.

The brain is behind all other movements... but not all of the brain is responsible for body language. The brain is roughly divided into three major sections... the *base brain* which deals with basic survival and body functions, the *limbic system* which regulates emotions and memory and the *neocortex* which deals with 'higher' functions such as thinking, abstracting, language etc. Body language responses originate in the limbic system... that is emotional response. This is critical to understanding and reading body language... body language is not **what** you think, it is not the content of a message, the content is in the words. Body language is not **how** you think, the processes of thought... however it can indicate what processes are happening. Body language is pure emotion... it is how **we feel** about the content and the situation. That means body language is not going to tell you what someone wants to say ... however, it will tell you how the person feels about it.



Lets go deeper into the limbic system. It's the part of the brain which keeps you safe. Imagine you are walking through the countryside, when, completely unexpectedly, a tiger jumps out of the bushes and stands growling and snarling in front of you. If you survive this encounter, its your limbic system that will save you. The base brain is managing the basic body functions... and the neocortex is shutting down in blind panic. The limbic system is in charge... it acts quickly, without conscious thought, it pulls on memory to identify the tiger as a tiger and to associate it with danger. Then the limbic system goes into safety mode ... freeze, flight or fight¹... in that order.

Imagine a different situation... you are sitting with a good friend in a favorite restaurant... how do you feel? Safe? In this case you are not thinking of freeze, flight or fight ... no... emotionally you are calm and relaxed. You are feeling comfortable. Once again, its your limbic system that is processing this... it's the part of your brain which is telling you that there is no danger... relax.

Your limbic system is constantly monitoring your environment, assessing how safe you are, and acting immediately if needed... these actions form the base of body language.

¹ 'Freeze' means to stop moving and stand completely still. 'Flight' or 'flee' means to run away, to escape. 'Fight' means to go on the offensive and attack.

How can we understand body language?

Understanding body language is both easy and difficult... its easy because we do it all the time... its basic instinct. Its difficult because often body language conflicts with the words the person is saying and the situation we are in... which do you believe? What you see or what you are told?

When observing body language, there are a few basic guidelines that will help make your observations meaningful. It's important to be aware of ...

- The **context** of the situation. Its perfectly normal to run around screaming and shouting just after a soccer player has kicked a winning goal in a World Cup match... the same behavior, from the same soccer player, would be very strange during his grandmother's funeral.
- Non-verbals that are **common to all human** beings regardless of gender, ethnic origin, nationality, age, etc. Everyone understands a smile.
- Movements that are **specific** to a group of people or individual. For example some cultures will show respect by looking away from someone, while other cultures will show the same respect by looking directly at the person.
- Look for **patterns and sequences** in body language. One movement means very little by itself, however when you can see a series of movements, linked to what the person is saying, then you can understand much more. For example, if you see someone smiling it could mean that they are happy. However, if you know the person is at a family event (context), and see them grimace as someone enters the room (common to all humans), then smile as soon as the person sees them (specific to a certain culture), then the sequence ... private grimace – public smile ... takes on a different meaning... it is more polite than genuine.
- Look for **how fast non-verbals change**. A sequence of non-verbals played at different speeds carries a different meaning. Imagine a shy person walking into a busy meeting room full of strangers ... at first they will be clearly uncomfortable and slowly begin to relax and open up when they meet a friend, and find a safe place to sit. This tells a very different story to someone who is displaying relaxed, confident behavior, then, when a peer says something, they respond for a split second with an uncomfortably backwards jerk, before moving rapidly back into a comfortable position. What was it about the comment that caused discomfort, and led the person to quickly, and deliberately cover their discomfort by moving back into comfortable position?

To understand each non-verbal movement its easiest to use a structure to group those movements. The structure I'll use is based on the book "What everybody is saying" (Joe Navarro with Marvin Karlins, 2008).

Joe Navarro's structure looks at body language according to...

- If a person is **comfortable** or **uncomfortable** with a situation.
 - Comfortable non-verbals are often open and upwards movements.
 - Uncomfortable non-verbals show in **freeze, flee** or **fight** movements which are often closed, downward movements.
- In which parts of the body you can observe this happening.
 - feet and legs
 - the trunk ... torso, hips, chest and shoulders
 - The arms
 - Hands and fingers
 - The face and head.

This structure covers many, but not all non-verbals. Please remember that there are some movements and postures that do not fit in this structure, and some non-verbals can send a variety of different and contradictory messages... for example, you may cross your arms because you are cold, your back hurts, you are comfortable and resting or you are uncomfortable and protecting yourself... in this situation the context, series of movements, and other simultaneous non-verbals will tell you more than the single posture.

Lets work through the structure to understand each part more clearly.

Discomfort

When someone is uncomfortable with a situation they will fall into the freeze, flight, fight behavior patterns. In the modern world we are rarely faced with growling tigers, however we are regularly challenged by threatening situations. When threatened we will first freeze, then flee and finally fight... always in this order.

- Freeze – shows itself in behaviors where someone stops for a fraction of second, breaks their breathing pattern, stops for thought, falls into a blank, or becomes passive and accepting. Freeze originates from the time when tigers (and other hunters) were a regular threat. The best survival mechanism was to hide, attract no attention and blend into the background.
- Flight – normally shows when someone begins blocking, defending or trying to move away from the threat. This originated from the need to escape attack, or block an attack. You'll notice this behavior when people cover their body as a form of protection, or lean away from people or situations they don't like.
- Fight – If all else fails then fight body language arises in displays of power and territory claiming. When getting ready to fight people will begin expanding their personal territory by pushing their arms out, but still protecting their body, raising voices, preening themselves by straightening a tie, grabbing a weapon and wagging the weapon, i.e. a pen, in the air.

Comfortable

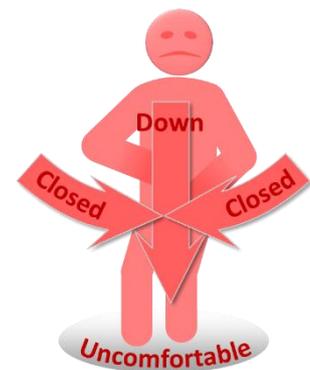
When someone is relaxed then obviously, they will do the opposite of freeze, flight, fight. They will move normally, not protect themselves, retreat or fight... they will relax and enter rapport with person they are talking to.

Open and upwards vs. closed and downwards movements.

Comfortable and uncomfortable non-verbals normally follow two simple patterns. Open vs Closed and Up vs Down. Please note that this is not always true, but is often correct.

Closed and downward moving non-verbals generally show that a person is **uncomfortable** with a situation so they will be exhibiting freeze, flight, fight behavior. That can be seen in

- feet and legs
 - Freeze ... the feet and legs will stop moving and then very slowly adopt a stable, prepared state by dropping closer to the ground.
 - Flight ... The feet will turn away from the threatening situation and prepare to escape. Legs will also prepare by tensing. People will often close or cross their legs to protect their genitals or, if standing, the legs will prepare to run. Blood will be channeled towards the main muscles which are needed for fast escape.
 - Fight ... the feet and legs will turn back towards the threat ready for attack. The person will drop slightly on bent knee ready for fast movement.
- the trunk ... torso, hips, chest and shoulders ...
 - Freeze ... a person will stop moving, stop breathing, breath lightly and irregularly.
 - Flight ... a person will close their body and arms around the trunk to protect their internal organs. They will try to make their torso smaller by hunching (shoulders down), or turning the side of their body towards the threat to minimize exposed area. In extreme situations blood will be taken away from non-critical survival organs like the stomach (which is one reason why stress is linked to stomach problems). Breathing will increase in order to oxygenate the body.
 - Fight ... the torso expands to maximum dimensions, lots of air is inhaled, but it is still protected.
- The arms
 - Freeze ... stop moving.
 - Flight ... or block. The arms will protect the torso and face by drawing in close and wrapping around.
 - Fight ... the arms will try to win territory but still stay close to the trunk to protect it.
- Hands and fingers
 - Freeze and flight ... Similar to all the above in closing to protect the body. The palms turn inwards, and the person will hide their valuable opposable thumbs. The person may pick up objects that form a barrier and use that to close themselves from the treat.



- Fight ... the hands get used as weapons by clenching into fists, pointing and gesticulating as if the index (pointing finger) was a sword. The person may pick up weapons or weapon like objects like pens or pencils and start waving them around.
- The face and head.
 - Freeze ... shows in a moment of no movement. Often the eyes will open wide and the pupils will dilate so the person can take in as much information as possible.
 - Flight ... the face begins to close, the eyes and pupils get narrower and focus on the threat. The eyes may close to 'hide' emotion. The lips will close by pressing together and lose color. The head will be pulled down, tortoise like, between the shoulders. Hands will move to protect the neck and begin touching the face and hair.
 - Fight ... the closing becomes more intense in the eyes as the focus and attention increases. The lips stay small, but the person may start flashing their teeth in various forms of grimacing and growling, by curling their lips upwards and pulling fake smiles.

Open and upward moving non-verbals generally show that a person is **comfortable** with a situation so they will be relaxed. That can be seen in

- feet and legs
 - The person will point their feet towards the comforting person or situation. The more excited a person, the more they will move up onto their toes and literally bounce with enthusiasm.
 - The legs will be relaxed and open. If the person is sitting they may cross their legs in a way which makes it difficult to escape quickly. Open legs will be relaxed.
- the trunk ... torso, hips, chest and shoulders ...
 - Relaxed people don't protect their trunk or genitals.
 - Breathing is relaxed and regular. Often when two people are in rapport, they breathe at the same rate.
 - If the person is excited their chest and shoulders will move up in joy.
- The arms
 - Happy arms move upwards ... imagine a footballer who scores a goal... holding the arms up in a 'V' shape is universal happy behavior.
 - Relaxed arms find a comfortable place to rest (which may be crossed arms)
 - Often the person will open their arms by showing the inside surfaces of their forearms.
- Hands and fingers
 - Happy hands are open and expressive... palms out, thumbs showing.
 - Relaxed hands will rest in comfort, and, if they touch each other, they will be relaxed and not finger locked.
- The face and head.
 - The face and head will move upwards
 - Smile muscles will open the face by pulling backwards and upwards.
 - Eyes will open and pupils dilate.



Please remember that all the above is a generalization. There are exceptions.

Typical comfort – discomfort – comfort sequences ... self-touching.

When humans get distressed they automatically comfort themselves with self-touching. This normally shows when people use the open palm of their hand, or finger tips, to gently touch another part of the body... for example; stroking the thighs, or upper arms, stroking the neck and throat, holding onto ears, preening hair, adjusting clothing, touching finger to finger tips etc. Sometimes it shows when the person uses their tongue to stroke the inside of their mouth.

Self-touching in a sequence can tell us a lot. For example ...

	Says	Body Language
Customer	<p>“How much does the watch cost?”</p> <p>Shows curiosity and comfort...</p>	<p>Smiles moving the mouth upwards</p> <p>Eyes are wide open and ‘bright’</p> <p>Breathing is relaxed</p> <p>Body is leaning forward getting closer to the watch.</p>
Sales Person	<p>“Ohhh ... that is a special watch.”</p> <p>Shows excitement</p>	<p>Smiles</p> <p>Leans and steps lightly towards customer</p> <p>Feet point towards customer.</p> <p>Arms and hands are open</p>
Customer	<p>“Yes.”</p> <p>Still comfortable, responds positively towards sales person.</p>	<p>Keeps open, relaxed posture</p> <p>Turns briefly towards the sales person and establishes eye contact before turning back to the watch.</p>
Sales Person	<p>“It costs €5000.-“</p> <p>A fraction of self-doubt.</p> <p>Which gets hidden under confidence.</p> <p>A tiny self-touching stroke for self-assurance...</p>	<p>For a split second</p> <p>Tiny downward movement at the corners of the mouth.</p> <p>Pupils contract ... then open again</p> <p>Eyes close at the end of the sentence longer than a blink</p> <p>Returns to confident, open non-verbals</p> <p>One hand closes and the fingers stroke the palm of the hand once before opening again.</p>
Customer	<p>“Only €5000.- Ohhh.”</p> <p>You must be joking!!!! But I can’t show it ... so be friendly to the sales person ... calm down with a quick self touch and ... lets get out of here!</p>	<p>Stops breathing for a second.</p> <p>Tiny movement away from the watch</p> <p>Smile falters</p> <p>Turns towards the sales person ... but the feet point toward the shop door</p> <p>Rub their hands together in a display of self-comforting</p> <p>Smile increases again, but is flatter ... more of a grimace</p> <p>Breathing returns to normal.</p>

Be careful when reading body language.

Following are some important points to keep in mind when reading non-verbal communication

- ⇒ Body language can tell you if someone is comfortable or uncomfortable. It cannot tell you if someone is lying or not. If you suspect someone is lying then this conclusion originates from a combination of; what you know about the person and context, what they are saying, how they are responding non-verbally, and your assumptions. Be sure that your assumptions are fair and are not based on misleading cultural prejudice.
- ⇒ Be very careful about attaching meaning to body language. A person may exhibit uncomfortable non-verbals when talking about a specific topic. This could be because they are; unsure of the facts, uncomfortable with the topic, not sure if you understand, just came from an uncomfortable phone call and have still not recovered, or perhaps they are sitting on an uncomfortable chair, or really don’t like you. You don’t know until you dig deeper to get more information.