

## Nonverbal Communication

### Nonverbal Communication Definition

Let's start with a definition of nonverbal communication so we are all coming at this from the same basis:

Nonverbal communication includes all other aspects of communication other than the words themselves. Nonverbal communication helps us to establish our identity and negotiate relationships.

### Common Examples of Nonverbal Communication

1. **Gestures:** Movements of our hands, arms, and head tell a lot about how we feel about an issue, what we are passionate or sad about, and even when we are angry. If we are excited, our gestures may increase in frequency and speed. If we are sad, our gestures might stop altogether.
2. **Body Language:** This is how our body reflects our internal emotions or thoughts. If we are sad, we might close in and sit with our arms crossed, head down. But if we are confident, we will probably stand upright with our shoulders back and we will look others in the eye as we communicate.
3. **How we utter words tells a lot about what is going on inside of us.** If we stutter and stumble through our speech patterns, it might indicate we are nervous or perhaps uncomfortable discussing a certain issue. Or, it might indicate we are not telling the truth in our discussion and are lying or fabricating a story.
4. **Features of our environment:** The way we decorate our environment tells a lot about the things we value, the things we are interested in, and shares our style with the outside world.
5. **Objects that affect our personal image & interaction patterns:** These are things we own or decorate ourselves with (this includes body modifications like tattooing/piercing(s)), they tell others what is important to us, they reveal what group(s) we belong to, and even our personal philosophy on modesty and sexuality.

### 5 Principles of Nonverbal Communication

1. **There are similarities and differences between verbal and nonverbal communication.**

Similarities between verbal and nonverbal communication include:

- Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is symbolic. This means that it is ambiguous, arbitrary, and abstract just like verbal communication is. A handshake may be bone crushing to one person but to another it may seem wimpy. And, what do the people shaking hands mean by that handshake? It's all arbitrary. Is the handshake a greeting between coworkers or is it an agreement to something (i.e. "let's shake on it")? It is really an ambiguous, abstract motion.

- Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is governed by rules. The rules are mutually agreed upon between people and develop over time. We know that kissing indicates an intimate relationship and that kissing using your tongue means a really intimate relationship usually involving something stronger than friendship maybe even a sexual relationship.
- Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication may be intentional or unintentional. Sometimes our facial expression may give another the “right idea” or the “wrong idea” depending on how our facial expression is interpreted. Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is subjective in its interpretation.
- Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is culture-bound and reflects the values & norms of a culture.

Differences between verbal and nonverbal communication include:

- Nonverbal communication is perceived as more believable than verbal communication. Many believe that what comes out of our mouth might be a lie but our body will never lie – body language is the true communication. If you are ever pulled over for a OWI (operating while intoxicated) or DUI (driving under the influence) and are asked to take a sobriety test – the one where you get out of the car and the cop asks you the questions and you “walk the yellow line” and/or touch the end of your nose and/or stand on one foot – one of the things that policeman is going to watch you for is body language. He is going to be watching to see where you look, your coordination, and your responsiveness to his test questions. FYI: A drunk person will tend to look at their feet or the line right in front of their feet but a sober person will tend to look much further out. And, no, I have never been through this test! I don’t have personal experience with this but I do have a close friend who is a police chief so we’ve chatted about this concept before.
- Nonverbal communication is multi-channeled while verbal communication is single channeled. Verbal communication comes out of our mouths (if we are deaf, it comes out of our hands through sign language!) but nonverbal comes out of our entire body – hands, facial expressions, body stance, feet placement, etc.
- Verbal communication is discrete while nonverbal communication is continuous. Discrete meaning that verbal communication happens in a given time frame – continuous meaning that nonverbal goes on and on, 24/7, not stopping.

## **2. Nonverbal communication can supplement or replace verbal communication.**

My children know when I give them “the look” that they better straighten up and behave. Sometimes, “the look” is more effective than anything that would ever come out of my mouth.

### 3. Nonverbal communication can regulate interaction.

If I am chatting with a friend that is rattling along in his communication to the point I get confused, I might put one finger up to stop him so he will clarify what he means or he might even stop his rattling banter so I can comment.

### 4. Nonverbal communication can establish relational level meanings including responsiveness, liking, and power or control.

When we look others in the eye, we establish a relationship with them - we invite the person to converse with us if we use friendly eyes but we discourage the person by not making eye contact. We use smiles, hugs, and some cultures use kisses as greetings to show that you like someone. We may give someone the "cold shoulder" by deliberately using body language to ignore the person. We exercise power and control through a variety of techniques: we may stand over a person to show our power in the situation or we may encourage the other so sit down to even out the power in a situation.

### 5. Nonverbal communication reflects cultural values.

When we see the American flag on someone's hat or t-shirt, we know that that symbol represents the cultural value of freedom in the United States. The symbol represents the Constitution, the style of government, the world power our nation has, and everything that American's stand behind as a collective culture. When that symbol is burnt, torn or destroyed, many American's become upset because the destruction of this powerful symbol represents the destruction of our core values: freedom of speech, government by the people/for the people, freedom of religion, etc.

## Types of Nonverbal Communication

1. **Kinesics:** This includes body posture and the motions the body engages in. Kinesics is a fancy word for "body language." We all know that body language is very revealing. In fact, research in communication shows that 90% of our communication is actually told through body language – not through the words we use! An important concept with body language is the phrase "We cannot not communicate." I know the double negative in that phrase sounds funny but the statement is valid. What it means is that we are always communicating – 24/7 we are always communicating even when we are not vocally speaking because so much of our communication is nonverbal. Therefore, "we cannot not communicate!"

2. **Haptics:** This means "physical touch" – how we like to be touched, what is an acceptable level or amount of touching, and what is culturally normal or acceptable touching. Some families are touchy-feely families (mine is this way!) where everyone is showing open physical affection. Others are much more closed with less physical contact between members (my husband's family is more this type – it took me years to get my father in law used to me hugging him!). These backgrounds tend to transfer themselves into our future comfort zones. For instance, if I come from a "huggy" family, I will probably be comfortable with large amounts of physical touch – perhaps from people I haven't even known for a long period of time. This can also be a cultural reflection as some cultures are much more openly physical than others.

3. **Physical Appearance:** This involves everything from the way we dress to the personal grooming habits we engage in. This one is pretty obvious! Just think about the last person you were romantically

interested in – the one who “turned you on” when you looked at him or her. What was it about them that caused you to turn your head for another look?

4. **Artifacts:** These are the personal objects we display, value, or hold on to because they have meaning for us. My grandmother used to say, we can tell a lot about a person by the junk that they keep! And, my Dad always says “One man’s junk is another man’s treasure!” To remember this word, think about an archaeologist on a dig in an ancient civilization. She finds an “artifact” from that civilization and attempts to assign meaning to it.

5. **Proxemics:** This is the study of space and how we use the space around us. Some of us like to fill up the space while others like a sparse existence. Some people are “pack-rats” who fill up our interiors while others are “neat freaks” with everything in its place in their space. To remember this word, think of “proximity.”

6. **Chronemics:** This is the use of time. How we use time, our punctuality in arriving or departing, and what our routines are says a lot about who we are. Some of us live by the clock – regimented and controlled by it. Others of us are more free spirits – we come and go on our whims. To remember this word, think of “chronology.”

7. **Paralanguage:** This is our vocal language but without actual words being used. It includes the utterances of our speech. For example, if I am listening to a shocking story that my friend is sharing with me, I might encourage her to continue by saying “oh!” or “ah!” if I am enlightened by what she says. Likewise, if I get hurt, I might cry out in alarm. These are not real words but are what we consider normal in our communication. To remember this word, break it down – para = “goes along with.” Therefore, paralanguage means something that goes along with language.

8. **Silence:** How we use silence or don’t use silence says a lot about our emotions. We can use silence as a weapon if we are angry or disappointed in them, i.e. giving someone the “silent treatment.” Or we might just be a quiet person by nature who enjoys “peace and quiet.” Sometimes people are perceived as shy because they tend to be quieter than others.