

## NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: THE SILENT GIVEAWAY

Of all the communication that a person witnesses (verbal or non-verbal) the non-verbal silence is the most interesting and informative, by far. Albert Mehrabian (1960) researched silent/non-verbal communication and found it to be *more believable than verbal communication*. It is an independent messaging system that is used differently by every person. How good are you at reading people? We are all constantly sending messages, whether we realize it or not!

The content of this article is to encourage thoughtful and accurate consideration of unspoken attributes of mankind. By increasing our personal and researched knowledge about unspoken body language, we increase our potential understanding and appreciation of human physical and behavioral attributes.

Not intentionally learned, but so very revealing is blushing, shaking, sweating, smiling, laughing, crying, and similar behaviors that show nervousness. Think of “The Look!” (whatever that is!), a pat on the back, a pat on the “rear,” and even a drop (or no drop or elevation) in the voice at the end of a sentence. Add to these examples just a very few of the many non-verbal behaviors--voice tone while moving the hands, shrugging the shoulders, wearing a certain color, decorating a home in a certain color, listening to a specific type of music, or even having a scented candle in the room. Our unspoken silence makes up our non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal (silent) communication has been, also, called the “transparency effect”. This says that we are all more transparent than we realize! However, the key in recognizing the “transparency effect” in others is to *correctly interpret* the non-verbal communication we witness.

### TERRITORIALITY (PRIMARY, SECONDARY, PUBLIC)

Humans have a sense of territoriality. This enables us to invite or disinvite social interaction. We have all sorts of signs, signals, and effects to establish our territory without saying a word. This comes from two types of learning—biological and social. For instance, in regard to biology, male animals often fight off other males to defend females. Socially, humans declare possessions and spaces of their own and set boundaries on possessions and spaces within the environment. Our social spaces and possessions might include our side of the bed, our desk, our wallet, our closet space, our car, etc.

The expression of PRIMARY territoriality can be represented as non-verbal and verbal. We use non-verbal “markers” to remind others as to what is “ours”. For instance, we place a sign of our name on the desk, put numbers on our house, and we often put our initials on items. Oh yes, we all say, “This is MINE!”

SECONDARY territoriality involves belongings we have for a limited time. We borrow books, have special food items for a snack, put your name on a pencil, etc. They are actually or figuratively borrowed or soon to be used up. They usually require a marker of some kind that allows for a temporary access to the item.

PUBLIC territoriality involves items that are shared by the public. That is, buses, roads, park benches, grass and trees in the park, etc.

“Territorial Invasion” is when someone else takes over a part or all of our territory. “Contamination” occurs when someone *destructively* takes over your territory---and that often becomes a legal matter.

Remember when you were in a crowded room and someone keeps staring at you? If you were led to believe that the person doing the staring is a “difficult person” the invasion becomes a “Psychological Territorial Threat” that causes stress—therefore, this nonverbal threat causes stress and an increase in blood cortisol excreted by the adrenal glands. Our body, in that type of situation, can become stiff, we pull in our elbows, and turn our bodies so that our back faces the threat in an attempt to reestablish our territory.

Determine another’s comfortable space by watching their behavior (e.g. a hand shake or a hug) and allow that person to nonverbally tell you their personal acceptable closeness. The amount of extension of the arm to your extended hand for a hand shake, the closeness (or not) of a hug, or even the desire for a private desk or cubicle are a few of the “little things” that tell “big stories”.

As a leader in a work setting, it is best to encourage, when you can, the flow of group conversation between people in an open non-curtailling environment rather than in a cubicle or confined work space.

Proxemics is the study of personal space, as a part of territoriality. It determines what we do, think, and how we react. Such as---

INTIMATE ZONE is for our family, close friends, and spouse. It is about 18 inches from us.

CASUAL-PERSONAL ZONE is for normal conversation. It is about 18 inches to 4 feet from us.

CIVIL INATTENTION is for the person with whom you have eye contact for a fraction of a second, then avert your eyes/gaze away from that person.

SOCIAL CONSULTATIVE is for most day-to-day activities while recognizing personal autonomy and privacy while conducting discussion. This ranges from 4 to 12 feet from us---known as an area of formal discussion.

PUBLIC is from about 12 feet from us to what you can see or hear. This includes observable activities.

## **DIFFERENCES IN CULTURES AND SUBCULTURES**

Some cultures require distancing the person from strangers; whereas, other cultures value closeness. For example, in Tanzania being too far away from another person as a matter of personal choice means the given message is that you reject that person; therefore, it is best to sit close to another person. Other cultures, such as the Arab culture, desire to be as close as possible when conversing—close enough to feel a person’s breath (bad breath or otherwise).

## SPACE, COLORS, AND MOOD

Research shows that we shape our own environment through determining our space, color, and mood. The physical management of these factors in our environment help to determine our personal behavior and the behavior of other people. The environment, in general, also triggers conscious and unconscious perceptions. Our personal perceptions, in turn, determine our behavior.

### Space—

There are three factors that determine the non-verbal spaces created by people. They are---

1. The flow of traffic: The requirements of personal movement within buildings are an example. Studies have shown that in an apartment house, the people living near the stairwells are more likely to boost the interpersonal interactions with others. (MIT 1950 study) Another example are the exits within certain buildings that are somewhat hidden—take as an example, the casinos that are laid out in a manner that often discourages finding your way out until you become aware of the layout.
2. The direction people face: Obviously when people face each other there is an increase in the possibility of social interaction. The family table usually requires people to face each other, which increases the opportunity for verbal and nonverbal communication. The bar stool, in comparison, does not face another person, thereby, decreasing verbal and nonverbal communication.
3. The location of the leader: The “leader” (or someone in charge) is usually at the head of the table— and is the person more likely to be in charge. If this person is not at the head of the table, he/she is located somewhere in a central location of the involved persons. (Remember that leadership means the encouragement and active involvement of others; so, where do you currently sit, as the leader, to encourage the nonverbal participation and involvement of others?)

### Colors---

All colors have meaning and cause an influence a person’s impressions and behaviors. When different colors are studied, some colors have consistencies in their interpretations, and some do not. Even color brightness has significant meaning.

The color of white seems to impart a feeling of goodness; whereas, black seems to give a negative feeling. Bright colors give a feeling of intenseness. Whereas, passive feelings can be related to black, white, blue, and pink. In the sports world, research tends to show that white uniforms or uniforms with white seem to be more positively responded to by referees than totally black uniforms. According to some studies, more penalties for teams wearing all black were reported to have occurred. Physical aggressiveness was reported to increase by merely wearing black.

(The question for you is related to how do people see you if you wear **black**? Do you see *yourself* as more aggressive—or not? In this case, more likely, the way YOU FEEL when you wear a certain color usually results in you *acting the way you feel*. Your behavior related to how you feel most often identifies your degree of aggressiveness, or lack thereof.)

The color of black is not always associated with death in some cultures. Blue and white in Asia are often the colors of a funeral. In Ghana, red is often combined with black for this occasion.

Red is a lucky color in Asia. International research has found that ovulating women will unpredictably often wear red. Red, being a bright color, is an attention seeking color. The color has been found to attract a male's attention toward females. Research has determined that men have the same effect on women if they (males) wear red---and women found that men wearing red were more sexually desirable and of higher social status.

#### Mood---

A nice warm cup of "something" or a hand warmer helps to promote a personal feeling of warmth and trust toward another person. If you provide a cold drink or cold pack to another person, there is reported to be an increase in the recipient's loneliness.

(Perhaps this knowledge can be used by safehouses and disaster shelters in times of community stress and should be an example of the fact that, "*all behavior has meaning*" as a universal concept!!

#### Body Types---

Body and faces can send many different messages. In regard to the *static features* of the body and face, research tells us that:

Body Shapes (Identified by William Sheldon)--

1. Endomorph is a heavier (fat) body type. He claimed that the digestive system probably works slowly. This person, usually, is known to be relaxed and sociable.
2. Ectomorph is a skinny body type. He claimed that the nervous system of this person probably dominates.
3. Mesomorph is a more muscular body type. He claimed that the muscular system probably is predominate.

#### Body Height---

1. The world-wide income for males is two percent more per one inch of height than females. Females over 5' 8" earn about 15% more than shorter females.
2. In romantic relationships, women seem to prefer taller men—especially if the female lives in a dangerous neighborhood.
3. Men often lie about their height on dating profiles—a tendency to exaggerate. Females frequently minimize (lie) about their weight on dating profiles.

Why has height become important? It has been speculated that, maybe, it is because in the animal kingdom height is a dominant factor and they tend to be bigger and stronger. The dominant animals lead the pack, the herd, or the group.

#### Waist-To-Hip Ratio in Women—

1. Men appear to be more attracted to women that have a waist to hip ratio of 0.70. Fertility seems to be increased with, at least, this ratio.

2. If the waist to hip ratio gets to 0.85 or higher, health issues are more likely to occur—diabetes and heart disease. These diseases often cause women to be less fertile.
3. It appears that men are more attracted to women who have a hip-ratio that signals fertility—and maybe the fact that they are, also, more attractive.

#### Weight---

1. The shift to an approval of increased weight has increased in the past 125 years in the U.S. There could be a connotation that heavier means more wealth and the availability to food.
2. In some Arabic cultures the fathers like to boast about their “heavier” daughters as evidence of the father’s ability to provide food.

#### Faces---

1. The neutral face (without expression) is determined by others to identify the personality of the person.
2. In 1950, there was an agreement that a personality can be identified by the neutral face. Research findings indicated that people who wore glasses were seen as smarter because it suggests, to some, that a person reads a lot. Broad-set eyes became a metaphor for broad mindedness. Conversely, narrow set eyes became a metaphor for narrow-mindedness. If the corners of your mouth turn up, it was thought that you must be a happy person.

Where some of the neutral face research findings *appear, sometimes* to be true, it is also true that health conditions could be the reason for what is seen.

#### Personality Traits---

Social scientists assume that we all have varying amounts of five personality traits.

These are conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and extroversion.

Assessments of photos show a *significant correlation* between the person’s photo personality assessment and the person’s formal/actual personality assessment.

#### Romantic Relationships---

John Gottman, a psychologist, noted a pattern of behavior in couples. He called them the four horsemen of the apocalypse: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal. Criticism and defensiveness are verbal signs that relate to sarcasm. Contempt is a nonverbal sign expressed in the face. Withdrawal occurs when the couple no longer talks to each other—and that *is extremely toxic*. Staying happy in a marriage requires a couple to do the little non-verbal “things”. They include, gentle squeezes, smiles, showing attentiveness—OFTEN!

#### Silent Signs of Pain---

One of the many responsibilities of a nurse is the recognition of pain. Nurses are expected to recognize pain just by looking at a patient. The grimace, tenseness, moaning, being combative, and many other non-verbal symptoms and vital sign changes can reveal pain intensity. Some patients will deny pain while their non-verbal says, without doubt, they are in pain.

It has been widely reported that nurses often do not assess non-verbal evidence of pain correctly. We need to remember that every person/patient is different and their diagnosis (medical or psychiatric) can cloud the accurate recognition of pain. Some patients think they “deserve pain” as if it were a redemption quality for their stated personal sins.

The message, here, is to increase awareness of the many unspoken behaviors that require an astute nurse to pay attention to the suffering patient. Do not ignore the symptoms. Narcotics are not known to addict when a person needs true pain relief. How many times have many of us ignored the silent signs of obvious pain and reported that the patient is resting without pain?

Your challenge---watch for the numerous and individual signs of non-verbal pain, treat that pain in an appropriate manner, evaluate the intervention, and teach other nurses the individualized reaction to the patient’s existing pain. Treat it as such, because you are the nurse! And—we know that no one deserves (and need not be) in unspeakable pain.

Suggested Reading:

“UNDERSTANDING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION” (Great Courses Course Guidebook)

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[www.mdcalc.com/nonverbal--pain--scale--nvps-nonverbal-patients](http://www.mdcalc.com/nonverbal--pain--scale--nvps-nonverbal-patients)

Behavioral Pain Scale (/behavioral-pain-scale-bps-pain-assessment-intubated-patients)

CPOT Pain Scale (/critical-care-pain-observation-tool-cpot)

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