

# What You

# Speaks Volumes

*By Cynthia Marie-Martinovich Lardner*

*How body language can be used to understand others*

**T***he study of man. The study of human behavior. A quest to understand who we are, why we are, and how we fit in with the rest of humanity. A need to understand the behavior of others. A need to predict the future by being able to predict the actions of another.*

When I first started practicing law, I took mental health commitment assignments from the Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb County Probate Courts. I visited most of the now-defunct regional public and private mental health facilities. I interviewed clients in four-point restraints and talked to clients while “others” elusively hung in the shadows.

Back then, there were not many treatment modalities available. Even for depression, there were few options. Institutionalization was not uncommon, but those institutions have since been dismembered. Now we hear commercials for antidepressants and anxiety-reducing medications while driving in our cars, reading the newspaper, or watching prime time television.

# Didn't Say



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**FAST FACTS**

Experts in the field loosely calculate that most of what we know about the brain has been learned in the last 10 years. Much of what we called mental illness or even behavior is now known to have a neurological etiology. Now, not only the presence of mental illnesses, but even pure emotional responses can be gauged using the most sophisticated nuclear medicine imaging techniques. Medicine has made an intangible tangible.

As attorneys, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of human behavior that we can apply in our law practices and in our personal lives. Since we do not have sophisticated imagery techniques at our fingertips, we must rely on our senses and our common sense to gauge our behavior and that of others. One way we can do so is by studying body language. "Nonverbal body cues are more immediate, instinctive and uncontrolled than verbal expression, bringing genuine attitudes and feelings smack into the open," stated Dr. Joy Davidson in a 1998 *Men's Fitness* article.

Body language can also be used to gauge a person's truthfulness. According to forensic expert and Elmhurst, Illinois, police chief,

## EXAMPLES OF BODY LANGUAGE

NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR	INTERPRETATION
Brisk, erect walk	Confidence
Standing with hands on hips	Readiness, aggression
Sitting with legs crossed, foot kicking slightly	Boredom
Sitting, legs apart	Open, relaxed
Arms crossed on chest	Defensiveness
Walking with hands in pockets, shoulders hunched	Dejection
Hand to cheek	Evaluation, thinking
Touching, slightly rubbing nose	Rejection, doubt, lying
Rubbing the eye	Doubt, disbelief
Hands clasped behind back	Anger, frustration, apprehension
Locked ankles	Apprehension
Head resting in hand, eyes downcast	Boredom
Rubbing hands	Anticipation
Sitting with hands clasped behind head, legs crossed	Confidence, superiority
Open palm	Sincerity, openness, innocence
Pinching bridge of nose, eyes closed	Negative evaluation
Tapping or drumming fingers	Impatience
Steepling fingers	Authoritative
Patting/fondling hair	Lack of self-confidence; insecurity
Tilted head	Interest
Stroking chin	Trying to make a decision
Looking down, face turned away	Disbelief
Biting nails	Insecurity, nervousness
Pulling or tugging at ear	Indecision

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[Http://www.deltabravo.net/custody/body.htm](http://www.deltabravo.net/custody/body.htm)

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John Millner, the window of opportunity lies between the time a question is posed and the time the answer is verbally presented. In this moment, unusual movements, posture, breathing and so on should be scrutinized. The benchmark is how an individual reacted to preliminary questions of a relatively innocuous nature. This is similar to the technique used in performing a polygraph or lie detector exam.

"Microexpressions" is what Paul Ekman, a University of California psychology professor who researches emotional expression and lie detection, calls the quick, involuntary "flashes of emotion" revealed by a person concealing the truth. Microexpressions last one-fifth of a second or less.

For example, among the gestures indicative of lying are touching one's face, placing a hand over one's mouth, ear-pulling, downcast eyes, glancing at the questioner, seat shifting, and looking down and left. Eye movement is also indicative of right-brain activity corresponding to falsification, rather than the left-brain activity associated with memory and recall. Similarly, an agreeable listener will close papers, place a pen down, and lay their hands flat down on the table.

We attorneys also need to monitor our own body language, since it conveys powerful unconscious messages to our audiences. Open palms, leaning forward, open-lipped smiling, and unbuttoning your coat upon entering a room can communicate openness. Confident people will lean forward in their chairs, steeple their hands, gesture with only one hand, or join their hands behind their backs. When people actively listen, they tilt or nod their heads and make lots of eye contact.

Research also shows that asymmetrical posture takes up more space and thus conveys a more self-assured, positive image than symmetrical posture. For instance, in an asymmetrical posture, an individual would cross one leg over the other knee or gesture with only one hand.

Even where we sit in a meeting can have a decisive effect. At a rectangular conference table, the popular view is that the end of the table is the "power position." In actuality, the power position is the middle of the long side of the table, since this is the area to which people most naturally direct their gaze. ◆

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## ON THE WEB

Another development that has enhanced our understanding of the psychology of nonverbal behavior is the rapid development of the Internet. Among the websites available are the following:

[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)—PubMed, the National Library of Medicine's searchable website. Its database is composed of over 11 million Medline citations. This site is the leading free-access medical research database.

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)—The National Institute of Mental Health's website. This site has on-line brochures addressing a significant number of commonly encountered illnesses.

[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)—The American Psychiatric Association's website.

[www.snm.org](http://www.snm.org)—The Society of Nuclear Medicine's website. It contains an overview of nuclear imaging using PET and SPECT scan technology.

[www.deltabravo.net/custody/mmpi-info.htm](http://www.deltabravo.net/custody/mmpi-info.htm)—A paper presenting an excellent discussion of the MMPI, a mental health screening instrument, and its proper use in divorce cases.

[www.personalityresearch.org](http://www.personalityresearch.org)—A well-rounded discussion of the various personality disorders and a listing of links.

[www.millon.net](http://www.millon.net)—The site of a well-known personality and personality testing researcher who assembled links to all of the leading organizations and associations in this area.

[www.borntoexplore.org](http://www.borntoexplore.org)—A research paper by Teresa Gallagher on attention deficit disorder prepared with a grant from the United States Department of Education. This paper was the foundation for what is now a well-organized site that includes material on giftedness, learning disabilities, the effects of nutrition, and a myriad of other related topics.

[www.hoagiesgifted.org](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org)—Information on emotional, psychological, and intellectual support for gifted adults and children. One new and significant longitudinal study by Linda Kreger Silverman, which is summarized on this site, states that one out of six gifted individuals will also have a neurological disorder, such as a learning disability or attention deficit disorder.

