Importance of Body Language in Communication

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Learning Objectives

• At the completion of this activity, participants will be able to:
  • Understand the importance of body language in communication
  • Recognize features of body language
  • Incorporate positive elements of body language into patient encounters
Clarifying terminology

• What is “body language”?
  • The process of communicating nonverbally through conscious or unconscious gestures and movements.

• Is this the same thing as “nonverbal communication”?
  • Nonverbal communication = communicating without words
  • Nonverbal communication can be a way we intend to communicate something, as in a foreign country where we don’t know the language.
Introduction/Background

• We make judgments based on body language, and those judgments can lead to meaningful outcomes (who gets hired, etc.)
  • Some of these judgments may linger from earlier times when we had to rely on split-second judgments to know if a person or situation was dangerous.
  • In prehistoric days, concealed hands could mean someone was holding a rock or some other weapon. In present-day business meetings, we may mistrust someone who keeps his or her hands out of sight.
Introduction/Background

• Psychologist Albert Mehrabian first described the “rule” that communication is 7% from our words, 38% from our tone of voice, and 55% from our body language.

• It is important for words and body language to be congruent.
Introduction/Background

• “OK Sign is Under Siege: How the Squeaky-Clean Hand Gesture Was Twisted by Trolls and Acquired Racist Undertones”—Chicago Tribune, May 30, 2019
  • Controversy apparently started in 2017 with a movement to perpetuate a hoax that the sign was a symbol of white supremacy.
  • Unfortunately, some white supremacists did adopt the sign, leading to the conflicting messaging
  • 2 Chicago-area high schools announced they would reprint yearbooks because some students were displaying the gesture
Introduction/Background

• How is this important to us in pharmacy?
  • Patients are reluctant to disagree verbally with clinicians, but may do so through body language.
  • Patients are more likely to accept suggestions and more responsive if they feel comfortable with the health care professional, so body language can contribute to a good rapport (or prevent one).
Mind-Body Link

• Amy Cuddy’s TED Talk on power posing
  • The power pose should be done in private, since standing with your hands on your hips can communicate aggression or a desire to dominate

• There is a strong connection between our mind and body; our body language can impact our ability to verbally communicate
  • When our body closes up, our ears and mind close up also
Take a moment to think about your body language...
Positive Body Language

- E = Eye contact
- M = Muscles of facial expression
- P = Posture
- A = Affect
- T = Tone of your voice
- H = Hearing the whole patient
- Y = Your response
Eye Contact

• There is a “sweet spot” for eye contact
  • Too much eye contact can come across as trying to establish dominance.
  • Too little can come across as dishonest, lacking confidence, or feeling uncomfortable
  • About 60-70% of the time when you are speaking, then about 90% of the time when the other person is speaking
  • Right amount varies by culture; an article from Australia said that eye contact about 1/3 of the conversation is appropriate
Facial Expressions

• Can convey worry, confusion, fear, sadness, and excitement.

• The facial expression should be consistent with the tone of the conversation.
  • If you are telling a sad story, the listener should not be smiling.
Gestures and Posture

• Gestures
  • Open hands with exposed palms can indicate honesty, as though you have nothing to hide.
  • Holding hands close to the heart can indicate sincerity

• Open posture means keeping the core of one’s body open and exposed
  • This tends to communicate friendliness and openness.
**Gestures and Posture**

- Leaning slightly forward can show appropriate concern
  - If lean beyond 75 degrees, it can come across as domineering
Personal Space

• Personal space:
  • Personal space for the average person is around 3 feet to the front, 1 ½ feet to either side, then 5 feet in the rear.
  • Personal space is relative to culture.
    • Body contact with strangers likely not appropriate in English, northern European, and Anglo-American cultures
    • Body contact with strangers may be more common in Arabic, Latin American, and Southern Mediterranean cultures.
Personal Space

• Personal space is relative to our upbringing
  • In general, children raised in a loving environment tend to have smaller personal zones as an adult than those not given adequate love, raised in an abusive environment, or those left “home alone” too often.

• Personal space is relative to gender.
  • Males tend to have larger personal zones than females.
Personal Space

• Our reactionary distance is the distance between us and someone else, within which our ability to react is greatly reduced.
  • This distance tends to be at least 4 feet.

• When talking with patients, the material being discussed may determine how close to stand to a patient.
  • Consider removing physical barriers, such as the counter, to create more personal space
  • If the patient leans or steps back, this may be a way of creating more personal space
Negative Body Language

• Feet pointing away from the person you’re talking to (your feet are usually pointed in the direction you want to go)
• Rapidly nodding head can signal impatience or that the person isn’t listening.
• Overuse of hands/speaking rapidly can be a sign of nervousness
• Arms crossed high on the chest can signal anger
• Touching one’s face while answering questions can be perceived as you are being dishonest
Which of the following is associated with positive body language?

A. Leaning in at a 45-degree angle
B. Maintaining eye contact 30% of the time when the other person is speaking
C. Gesturing with open, upward-facing palms
D. Maintaining 2 feet of personal space when standing behind someone
Which of the following is associated with negative body language?

A. Gesturing with hands at heart-level
B. Placing a finger alongside your cheek when responding to a question
C. Walking from behind the counter to stand next to a patient when talking to a patient
D. Slowly, infrequently nodding the head when listening to a story.
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• Handshake
  • Western culture: strong handshake = authority and confidence
  • Far east: strong handshake = aggressive (bowing is preferred)
  • In certain African countries, a limp handshake is the standard
  • Men in Islamic countries never shake the hand of a woman outside the family
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• Facial expressions
  • Many facial expressions appear to be universal

• Hand gestures
  • The “OK” sign is offensive in Greece, Spain, Brazil, or Turkey
  • Thumbs up in Greece/the Middle East means “up yours”
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• In the US and parts of Europe, this gesture beckons someone to come closer.

• In China, East Asia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and other parts of the world, it is used only to beckon dogs and is offensive to use with people.

• It can actually get you arrested in the Philippines.
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• On the 2005 Inauguration Day, President George W. Bush gestured with the Texas Longhorns “Hook ’em, horns” sign.

• Some news stories interpreted this as a salute to Satan.

• Other new stories thought it was an astonishing message, as many Mediterranean and Latin countries use this gesture to tell someone their spouse is cheating on them.
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• **Eye contact**
  - Most western countries: eye contact = confidence, attentiveness
  - Middle Eastern countries: same-gender eye contact is more sustained and intense; more than a brief glance between genders is inappropriate.
  - Asian, African, Latin American countries: unbroken eye contact is aggressive and confrontational; avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect in hierarchy

• **Touch**
  - Northern Europe and the Far East: very little physical contact beyond handshakes
  - Middle East, Latin America, southern Europe: touch is part of socializing
  - Arab world: men hold hands and kiss in greeting, but wouldn’t do this with a woman
  - Thailand and Laos: it’s taboo to touch anyone’s head, even children
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• Moving your head
  • In some parts of India, tilting the head from side to side confirms something or demonstrates active listening.
  • There is a video from 2014 that decodes Indian headshakes

• Sitting positions
  • Japan: sitting cross-legged is disrespectful, especially with someone older or more respected
  • Middle East and India: showing the soles of your feet or shoes is offensive
Cultural Differences in Body Language

• Silence
  • North America and UK: silence = there is a problem; discomfort; disinterest
  • China: silence = agreement and receptiveness; a question may only be answered after a period of contemplative silence
  • Japan: silence from woman = expression of femininity
Which could lead to an inappropriate interpretation of body language?

A. Smiling at a stranger in Greece
B. A limp handshake with someone in Japan
C. Touching a child on their head in Thailand
D. Remaining silent for several moments after being asked a question in China
Now let’s shift into how body language affects communication
5 Mistakes People Make in Reading Body Language

• Not considering the context
  • Example: yawning in a meeting, when they were up in the middle of the night with a sick child instead of indicating boredom

• Finding meaning in one gesture
  • The human brain pays more attention to negative messages than positive ones, so people are on the alert for any “keep away” signs
  • Example: standing with their arms folded across your chest, when they’re cold instead of unapproachable
5 Mistakes People Make in Reading Body Language

• Not knowing the person’s “baseline”
  • A person’s current body language must be compared to their usual body language
  • Example: frowning when they’re concentrating can be misconstrued as a reaction to something you just said

• Judging through an array of personal biases
  • If the other person reminds you of a dear friend, their body language may be better interpreted than someone who reminds you of an enemy
5 Mistakes People Make in Reading Body Language

• Evaluating body language through a filter of a cultural bias
  • Cross-cultural body language can be difficult to interpret or judge.
Listening to Others’ Body Language

• Solitary signals likely aren’t as significant as clusters of signals.

• Some patients aren’t comfortable expressing feelings, engaging in conflict or confrontation in a health care setting so they may not communicate these things verbally.

• There is body language that can communicate symptoms:
  • Severe pain
  • Profound dyspnea
  • Unsteady gait/balance
Use of body language with patients

• Lean forward when talking to patients
  • This establishes that you are engaged in the conversation and creates trust

• Avoid crossing your arms when talking to patients
  • This creates an authoritative position and can be interpreted as condescending.

• Make good eye contact when talking with patients
  • Looking around the room or away from the patient can be perceived as a lack of trust or dishonest

• When possible, mirror the patient’s body language
  • This communicates understanding
Use of body language with angry patients

• Our reactionary distance is a minimum of 4 feet. So, when approaching an angry person, stop at least 4 feet from them.

• Eye contact:
  • Constant eye contact with an angry patient can raise their anxiety level.
  • Little/no eye contact with an angry patient can show a lack of supportiveness.
  • People tend to look at a target before attacking it, and there can be a 0.4 second pause between when someone glances at the target and the attack.
What does this body language say?
What does this body language say?
What does this body language say?
What does this body language say?
What does this body language say?
Conclusion

• Body language is an important aspect of communication
• There are cultural differences to body language and its interpretation
• Solitary signals may not be as significant as clusters of signals
• Our patient’s body language may communicate what they don’t feel comfortable verbalizing.
Additional Resources

• “Communication in Pharmacy Practice: An Overview” Nora MacLeod-Glover

• “Effective Communication for Health Care Professionals” E Mackenzie, CS Farah, NW Savage

• “E.M.P.A.T.H.Y.: A Tool to Enhance Nonverbal Communication Between Clinicians and Their Patients” Helen Riess and Gordon Kraft-Todd

• “Approaching an Upset Person: Body Language and Verbal Communications” Ronald W. Ouellette
Additional Resources

- https://virtualspeech.com/blog/cultural-differences-in-body-language
- https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2011/03/01/the-mistakes-people-make-reading-your-body-language/#252174f29c0f