



National Healthcare  
Communication  
Programme

# Nonverbal Communication

A leaflet for healthcare staff



*Making conversations easier*

# Nonverbal Communication

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1. Movements
2. Touch
3. Paralanguage
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Brings you back to contents

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*The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said*

Peter Drucker, 1909-2005



# Nonverbal Communication

## 1. Movements

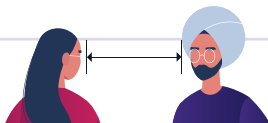
**Kinesics** refers to the study of hand, arm, body and face movements.



### Facial expression

Our faces are very expressive. Keeping an **open, warm facial expression** helps to build rapport with patients and colleagues. Ensure that your facial expression matches the content of your speech as this has a positive impact on building rapport, trust and confidence.

### Eye contact



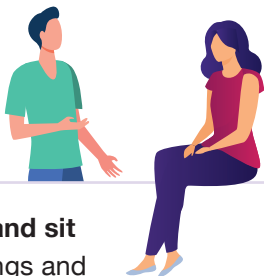
When communication begins, eye contact can help to establish rapport. Making eye contact signals that you are listening and interested in what the other person is saying. **Your level of eye contact should reflect that of the patient.** Be aware of cultural differences. For example, in some cultures, an extended gaze can convey hostility.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 1. Movements

### Posture



How we **walk, stand and sit** can give clues to feelings and emotions. A slumped posture can indicate tiredness. Shoulders relaxed with an upright posture, facing towards the other person indicates confidence and openness. In terms of sitting, **leaning forward** while facing the person demonstrates interest.

### Head movement



A **head nod** is a nonverbal sign of acknowledgment. It can also be used to show that you are listening and it encourages patient to continue with their story. Your head tilted to one side shows interest in the conversation.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 1. Movements



### Gestures

There are many types of gesture. *Illustrators* are the most common and are used to clarify the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use a **hand gesture** and say something like... *tell me more...* to encourage a patient to continue talking. In healthcare, subtle use of your arms and hands to animate a conversation can be helpful.

### Movements

- ☐ Facial expression
- ☐ Head movement
- ☐ Eye contact
- ☐ Gestures
- ☐ Posture

### TIP

In general a smile is one of the most important skills in building rapport. People perceive smiles as more authentic when the other person 'smiles with their eyes'.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 2. Touch

***Haptics** refers to the study of communication by touch*



### Touch

Touch is a powerful communication tool. It conveys many messages and can be beneficial in terms of giving emotional support and showing care and concern. A **handshake**, pat on the arm or a **touch on the shoulder** are considered acceptable forms of touch in healthcare.

### Touch

- ☐ Handshake
- ☐ Touch on the shoulder or arm



# Nonverbal Communication

## 2. Touch

### TIP

Use caution when interpreting the meaning of nonverbal behaviors. The same gesture might have many different meanings depending on factors such as the relationship between communicators, the context and cultural norms.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 3. Paralanguage

**Vocalics** is the study of paralanguage. Paralanguage is the vocal, nonverbal component of speech and includes pace, pitch, tone, volume, articulation, and rhythm.

### Pitch



**Pitch** helps to convey meaning and communicate the intensity of the message. A high pitch indicates feelings of joy, fear and anger. A low pitch can indicate depression or a state of calm.

### Volume



**Volume** helps to communicate intensity. Loudness can indicate confidence or aggression. Soft voices can indicate helplessness or gentleness.

### Pace



**Pace** refers to how fast or slow a person speaks, fast talkers can convey excitement or nervousness, slow talkers can come across as indifferent or thoughtful.





# Nonverbal Communication

## 3. Paralanguage

### Tone



The **tone** of voice is the most complex vocal characteristic. Pleasing voices are generally those that are lower in pitch and not monotone.

### Articulation



This relates to how you pronounce your words. Do you slur your words (ok for a casual encounter) or pronounce each syllable precisely (required in formal settings)?

### Rhythm



This determines which words will be emphasised in a sentence. Variations in rhythm can change meaning.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 3. Paralanguage

### Metamessages



Many messages can have two levels of meaning. One level is the basic information that the spoken words contain. The second level is the metamessage, communicated through pitch and inflection. For example, a basic question... *'Do you know how long I have been waiting?'*. Or with a change in pitch and inflection... *'Do you know **how long** I have been waiting?'*.

### Paralanguage

- |                                 |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pitch  | <input type="checkbox"/> Tone         | <input type="checkbox"/> Meta-messages |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volume | <input type="checkbox"/> Articulation |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pace   | <input type="checkbox"/> Rhythm       |  |

### TIP

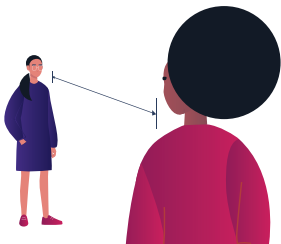
It is often through our paralanguage that we reveal what we are thinking and feeling. Reflect on your paralanguage during a conversation with a patient. Are your nonverbal behaviours reflecting and supporting the words that you are using?



# Nonverbal Communication

## 4. Space

**Proxemics** refers to the study of how human beings use space to convey messages.



Hall (1959) identified **four** specific spatial zones that convey messages.



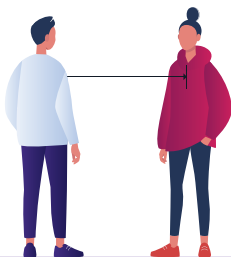
### Public zone

The public zone is **12 – 20 feet** from the body. The communication that occurs in this zone is formal and not intimate. An example here is a teacher in a classroom.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 4. Space



### Social zone

The social zone is **4 – 12 feet** from the body. This is the preferred zone for a professional interaction as it reduces the suggestion of inappropriate behaviour or unintentional touching.



### Personal zone

The personal zone is **1.5 to 4 feet** from the body. This is the zone for friends, close acquaintances and healthcare workers. You can easily touch the other person and discuss issues in relative privacy.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 4. Space

### Intimate zone

The intimate zone is **0 to 1.5 feet** from the body. This is the zone allowed for close friends and loved ones. If we find someone in this zone that doesn't belong there, we can feel uncomfortable or threatened.



### Territoriality

Territoriality relates to the spaces that we occupy and can have an impact on communication. Sometimes territory conveys power in a relationship (the CEO's office). We can claim territory with **occupation of an area**, for example sitting in the same seat in the canteen every day or using **nonverbal cues to mark our territory** (leaving your coat on a chair in the bar).



# Nonverbal Communication

## 4. Space

### Space

- ☐ Public zone
- ☐ Social zone
- ☐ Personal zone
- ☐ Intimate zone
- ☐ Territoriality

### TIP

How close people stand or sit varies across cultures. In clinical situations, you may need to enter a patient's intimate zone, creating discomfort or embarrassment. Be sensitive to this and acknowledge how normal that feeling is by saying something like...

*No one really likes this part of the procedure...* Ask permission before touching a patient, including for task-related touching such as taking temperature, blood pressure or pulse.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 5. Time

**Chronemics** is the study of how time is used in communication.

### Time



Time can be used as a communication tool in many ways, from **punctuality** to expectations around waiting and response time, to general principles around **time management**. For example, do we show up for meetings or appointments on time? Chronemics also refers to the **amount of time we spend talking**... do we tend to dominate a conversation or respect the turn-taking patterns of our society?

### Time

- ☐ Punctuality
- ☐ Waiting and response times
- ☐ Time management
- ☐ Turn-taking during conversations



# Nonverbal Communication

## 5. Time

### TIP

Avoid glancing at the clock during a consultation – it suggests you wish to bring a conversation to an end. If you need to draw a conversation to a close, use words... *would it be alright to leave this for now?*, or consider signposting at the beginning of the conversation...

*We have 15 minutes for our session today, what would you like to focus on during that time?*





# Nonverbal Communication

## 6. Personal presentation

**Personal presentation** includes your appearance and the artifacts with which you adorn yourself.

### Appearance



**Appearance** refers to you, your facial and body type, your hair and skin colour. We do not have as much control over these nonverbal cues as we do with other nonverbal aspects of communication.

### Adornment



**Adornment** refers to the physical objects you use to express yourself: the clothes you wear and accessories such as jewellery or glasses. Appearance can affect judgements like a person's character, personality and status.



## 6. Personal presentation

### Personal presentation

- ☐ Appearance
- ☐ Adornment

#### TIP

Although what you wear or how you fix your hair does not define you as a person or healthcare worker, it does send messages about you to the patient and their family. Be aware of your personal appearance, a professional approach is important to build trust and confidence.



# Nonverbal Communication

## 7. Environment

*In healthcare we should also consider **environmental** aspects of nonverbal communication.*



### Environment

Some environments invite and support healthcare conversations, others do not. Consider furniture placement, cleanliness, lighting, decorations and scent. These all signal how we want a conversation to proceed.

### Environment

- ☐ Furniture placement
- ☐ Cleanliness
- ☐ Lighting
- ☐ Decorations
- ☐ Scent



# Nonverbal Communication

## 7. Environment

### TIP

A warm and restful consulting room communicates a welcoming message; an untidy, uncomfortable one may do the opposite.

### Note

Nonverbal communication can vary from country to country and also among different cultures. The main cultural differences in nonverbal communication occur within the categories of eye contact, personal space and touch.

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This Skills Card is the work of the National Healthcare Communication Programme.

