Nonverbal Communication

A leaflet for healthcare staff

Making conversations easier
The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said

Peter Drucker, 1909-2005
1. 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.
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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.
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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.

**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’.
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.

**Haptics** refers to the study of communication by 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.
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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 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 helps to communicate intensity. Loudness can indicate confidence or aggression. Soft voices can indicate helplessness or gentleness.

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.
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.
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
- Pitch
- Volume
- Pace
- Tone
- Articulation
- Rhythm
- Meta-messages

**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?
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.
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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.
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).
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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.
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5. Time

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

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

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

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.
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.