

Body Language

Communication consists of body language, voice tonality and words. This in itself may not seem remarkable but when you realise that body language accounts for 55%, voice tonality 38% and words only 7% of communication you may begin to understand what a vital role body language has in self protection. Most opportunistic assailants will have already decided who their victim is before any words are exchanged so it follows that a person's body language is a major factor when an assailant is looking for a victim.

In interviews Geoff Thompson (British Combat Association) conducted with muggers, rapists, etc., the general consensus was that the victims had 'asked for it'. In one case the attacker had walked past the victim no less than 4 times! It was obvious to the mugger that this individual was not aware of their surroundings and therefore would be easy to approach. With little or no warning a victim will almost certainly experience Adrenal Dump (see Adrenaline and Fear) with the likely outcome being paralysis through fear, in other words, they will be at a loss to take in what is happening let alone put up a fight.

We make decisions and assumptions about others by their body language and they do the same to us although we often do not realise why or even how. This often takes the form of feeling an instant like or dislike of someone for example. Just as common is the inability to quantify these feelings.

'There's something about him I don't trust. I don't know what it is but I just don't trust him'. Sound familiar?

It is important to recognise the way in which we communicate to ourselves with feelings because they are vitally important when it comes to reading a situation and if we can learn to trust these 'feelings' or instincts they will give us an edge.

When someone gets too close to us we feel uncomfortable, they are 'in our space'. Again, unconsciously we all know to respect the space of others and avoid doing getting too close. In a crowded train when we are forced to be in very close proximity to others, sometimes even touching, we display our unease by standing rigidly a clear signal that says 'I know I'm in your space but I don't want to be here, I feel uncomfortable with this and I'm not a threat'. This situation is very common so next time you are on a train or bus and you find that it is crowded try to notice the change in the body language of others and of course, yourself.

If we now apply this situation to the street we find the rules have changed slightly. You never see people as close to each other as they would be on train or bus, unless of course, they were intimate. The area which we call our 'space' expands and contracts according to the situation, less than a foot on the train, four to five feet in the street, twenty or more in an empty street at night etc.

For self protection purposes we need to understand if an invasion of your space is a threat or not and for this I will give you two examples.

Example 1:

You are walking along a street and you are approached by a man who walks right up in front of you, smiles and asks for the time of day.

So what's wrong with that? It seems quite innocent until you look a little deeper. This person has quite literally blocked your path, he may be smiling but his actions are totally aggressive. He is in your face and in your space, you cannot move forward and because of his proximity he is taking up most of your field of vision leaving you open to a blind side attack if he is not alone.

Do I sound a little paranoid? Let me explain. Ask yourself this 'How would I approach someone if I wanted to ask the time?' I cannot speak for you but if it were me I would probably lean into their field of vision to get their attention (not block their path), smile and say 'Excuse me, do you have the time please?' and I would probably lean into their field of vision at a distance of four to five feet. I must point out that this is not a strategy I devised for asking the time I just paid attention to my body language and noticed my behaviour, something we can all do.

Can you now see the difference between the first and second approach, how the first is a threat disguised behind a smile and the second is normal innocent behaviour?

Other clues to help you:

The Eyes:

Is the person looking at you or are they looking to see if the coast is clear (i.e. Witnesses)?

Breathing:

Is the person breathing heavily or quickly. (Possible sign of adrenal release)

Voice:

Does the person's voice quaver? (Possible sign of adrenal release)

Skin Colour:

Does the person's skin appear abnormally pale? (Once again, Possible sign of adrenal release or drug abuse making them less susceptible to pain or reasoning)

Asking someone for the time of day or asking for directions should not give anyone cause to experience adrenal dump (see Adrenaline and Fear). This is a major sign that the person is possibly hyped up prior to an attack.

Paying attention to body language allows us to build a picture of the intentions of the individual. One sign alone does not confirm our assessment but when three or four point to a possible threat we had better pay attention, and quickly. If someone intends to rob or attack you they will experience adrenal release, look for the signs but bear in mind that an experienced person may be able to disguise them so focus on body language and proximity.

Example 2: (This is more applicable for women)

You are on a crowded train or bus and you notice that a man touching you with his body but it seems innocent.

I know a lot of women who have been in this situation and they have reacted in many ways but one of the constant features was that initially, they did not want to make a scene because they were not sure whether or not the contact was intentional. I must underline that none of these women are martial artists or contacts through training circles, I want to point out that these are people I have met socially or at work to underline how common this type of incident is. Some of these women later found they had been sexually assaulted and no, I won't go into details.

Many people find it hard to believe that you can be sexually assaulted in a crowded train or bus in the middle of the rush hour but although it is not an epidemic it occurs regularly enough to be highlighted here. Don't forget that most incidents will not go this far and sexual gratification does not necessarily involve groping someone, this could mean rubbing your leg with theirs, standing next to you when you are sitting with their crotch close to your face or (as a woman friend of mine noticed) placing their hand on one of the poles on the train so that when the train moves your breast touches their hand! The possibilities are endless.

Another common feature was that the women were (at the time) not confident people. In other words they didn't look like the type to turn around on a crowded train and shout 'F*** off you pervert!'.

So how can you tell if the contact is a more than innocent? As stated above you need to be aware of body language and when we get too close to someone we show outward signs of discomfort by changing our posture. In most of these cases the person who was too close did not display these signs which means they did not feel uncomfortable in the situation. This is all the more prominent when everyone else is displaying discomfort.

You cannot though rely on body language alone as the person might just be unaware or inept at social graces but there are ways of finding out. Most men would be horrified with the thought that other people thought they were acting in such a way as to appear 'creepy' and when aware that a woman is uncomfortable in their presence will often apologise (whether guilty or not) and make sure they keep their distance. This can be used to gauge a situation by checking their reactions.

Here are some suggestions.

Make sure the person knows you are there:

You can do this by coughing or making seemingly accidental contact. If we are already in contact for any period of time we soon become unaware of it so movement will draw attention.

If the person is behind you:

Try and move away, if they persist and move with you 'accidentally' step back onto their foot with the heel of one of your shoes making sure you use all your body weight. Immediately turn and face the person and apologise sincerely for your mistake ensuring plenty of eye contact and then keep facing that way.

If you are sitting down with the man facing you:

In this situation make sure you use your legs as a barrier. The person is going to look away as if they are unaware of the proximity, if you want to take action you can get up and move to another carriage or part of the train or bus but as you do so firmly but 'accidentally' catch their groin with your elbow or handbag and immediately apologise profusely.

If you are sure it is deliberate:

Often this is difficult but you must be strong and say something. Either step away or if necessary push him back and shout out something like 'How dare you!' or 'Get your hands off me'. This is guaranteed to grab the attention of those around you although you cannot rely on anyone else to intervene. Remember that the only knowledge of the incident other people on the train will have will be from what you shout so a simple 'F*** off' might imply familiarity with the person and many people do not like to get involved. Obviously your first course of action should be to seek assistance but this is not always possible, if you need help ask for it.

I remember a situation whilst shopping with my wife in Oxford Street when a young woman pushed a grey haired man through doors of the shop we were in and repeatedly slammed him against them. She was shouting 'How dare you touch me! Who do you think you are?' as she did this I was thinking 'What's going on?' and then 'Good luck to you'. Several slams and a few

choice words later, she turned around and shouted to everyone 'Are you just going to stand there? Can someone help me?'. After that I went over and stayed with the man until the police arrived. When I spoke to the woman it turned out that the man had groped her on a bus, she lost her temper, dragged him off and forced him into the shop. After the initial adrenaline rush had expired she was exhausted and upset that no-one had helped her! I can't speak for anyone else but from where I was standing it looked as if she was doing just fine.

Now here is my point, it '**looked**' as if she was doing just fine. Unless you let people know exactly what you want they will judge a situation the way they see it. It took this girl all her strength and courage to tackle this man but when the reserves were empty she needed help, if she hadn't asked for help she may not have got it. Remember that!

Awareness and body language are inter-related. Your body language will broadcast for all to see your current state of awareness and it is extremely obvious to anyone looking for the signs. Being aware will alter your body language and being aware will also give you time to assess the situation. This in turn will again alter your body language letting everyone who is looking know that you are aware. In other words, a mugger who may see you as a victim will realise that you are aware and find you less easy to approach. Without surprise on their side the prospect of resistance is vastly increased and this will hopefully force the mugger to look elsewhere.

Unfortunately muggers and their ilk don't wear labels so any approaching individual unknown to you is a potential assailant. This may sound a little bleak but it's just the way it is. Being aware is not paranoia but subconsciously scanning your surroundings and when you have mastered it (which doesn't take long) you won't even realise you are doing it.