

## Body Language 13

### Wringing the Hands

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

When you think about it, the human hand is a remarkable instrument. We have amazing dexterity and control of motion that is not seen in any other species. I once saw a demonstration by a speaker who had no hands. In order to illustrate the impact, he had a member of the audience come up on stage. There was a bottle of water on the table. The speaker asked the man to take a drink of water. Without using his hands, it was impossible for the man to get the bottle open. Think about how you would attempt to do it.

We take for granted how blessed we are that most of us have full use of our hands for most of our lives. We signal some of our emotions with gestures using our hands all the time. Just to sample a few common gestures, you can convey the following concepts with simple gestures. Try to show the following concepts using just your hands:

Stop  
Hurry up  
Call me  
Just a little bit  
Great job  
See you later  
Text me  
I'm not sure  
Go ahead

In future articles, I will deal with various ways we use our hands to communicate meaning and amplify our verbal communication. In this article I will focus on the gesture of wringing the hands. It is a common form of body language that we have all witnessed and all practice at some point. Like all gestures, there can be more than one meaning to this gesture, but the most common one is anxiety.

When a person is nervous, it is natural to put palms together and squeeze and slide one palm over the other in a wringing motion. Next time you are at the dentist's office waiting for your appointment, if you are not reading a magazine or fiddling with your phone, look down at your hands. Chances are you will be doing some form of hand wringing. Until you stop and think about it, you are probably unaware that you are even doing it.



In the attached photograph, we see a cluster of body language signals that indicate the man is anxious. He is wringing his hands. His head is lowered toward the hunched shoulders revealing less exposed neck. His jaw is set and lips are pursed. His head is slightly tilted. He has an upward glance and a slightly raised eyebrow.

Hand wringing can also result from the hands being cold. The physical friction of one hand sliding over the other creates some heat, and the hands feel warmer. Often rather than wringing the hands in a closed pattern, when people are cold, they tend to slide the palms and fingers over each other with fingers pointing straight up.

Coincidentally, anxiety can also cause the hands to become cold, because the body instinctively sends more blood to the vital organs in times of crisis or fear. The body is preparing for fight or flight. This is the reason your hands often feel cold when you have a job interview, a performance appraisal, or have to speak in public.

In order for any hand gestures to be effective, the hands must be visible. This is because you cannot gesture at all to add credibility and congruence to what you are saying. This is the reason that hiding your hands when talking with someone generally results in somewhat lower trust.

We shall revisit hand gestures later in this series because there is a wealth of meaning to be understood. Hand gestures are particularly important when we first meet a person because there is a lot of evaluation going on at that time. We can actually plant a seed of trust (or not) within just a few seconds, as I will explain in a future article.

In the meantime, take note of the hand gestures you see. Note that usually wringing of the hands goes along with some form of anxiety. Also note that some people use hand movements to emphasize almost every word they utter while other people are much more restrictive with their hand gestures. Take note of how you use your own hands when talking to other people. You do it all the time, but are rarely conscious of these actions.

*This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/Bodylanguage](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/Bodylanguage) or on this blog.*

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