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Afraid

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A person who is experiencing fear may show it in several different ways with his or her body language.

In this article I will highlight the most common ways people express fear without speaking. First, we need to understand that there are an infinite number of different sources and magnitudes of fear.

You might be afraid that the rumor you heard about a year-end layoff could be true. Depending on your seniority or other factors, you could be afraid of losing your job.

On the other extreme, I may be convinced there is a thief with a gun in my apartment about to enter the room where I am trying to sleep.

The type and intensity of the body language signals will depend not only on the reason I am afraid but also my current ability to tolerate uncertainty and not show it. This spectrum of signals makes the interpretation of one's body language signals a chancy endeavor.

As with all body language, when trying to interpret what you see you need to take into account several factors:

1. Is there a cluster of signals that all point in the same direction? If so, that will greatly enhance a correct diagnosis
2. Is this person from a culture different from the one I am most familiar with? Although fear is a primal feeling, how it is expressed in body language can be unique to a specific culture. The likelihood of misinterpretation goes up dramatically if you are observing a person from a different culture than your own.
3. Is the observed body language as a result of a specific stimulus or is it a habitual pattern for this person?
4. If there is a specific stimulus, is the reaction immediately following the stimulus, or is there a delayed reaction?
5. Is the person picking up and mimicking another person who is making an overt signal of fear? If so, the gesture may not be genuine; it could be an imitation.

6. Is the person making an attempt to hide the emotion or is the reaction obvious to everyone?
7. Is the person consciously attempting to look a certain way or is the reaction an unconscious and authentic gesture, at least at first?

These are the main factors that will influence the specific gesture in reaction to fear. Here are some of the common facial and body reactions to fear that we have all seen at some point.

Contorted Facial Muscles

The narrowing of the eyebrows and wrinkling of the forehead is a pretty good give away that the person is experiencing fear. You need to be careful though, because the same facial contortions are common with anger. Look for more corroborating signals.

Hands to the mouth

Usually both hands will go to the mouth when a person is experiencing high fear. It may take the form of symbolically biting the nails, or it may be to actually cover the mouth and eyes. The person is trying to disappear from sight.

Arms outstretched

Another gesture of fear is a kind of blocking motion made by outstretching the arms in front of the person with palms facing the thing being blocked. Here, the idea is to put up a figurative wall between yourself and the offending person, animal, or thing. In this gesture, the head may be lowered and shoulders raised as we cower in fear. The posture is to make yourself a smaller target.

Behind an object or blanket

Children will often express fear by hiding behind something, like a couch cushion or a blanket, then the gesture is to peek out ever-so-slightly from behind the safety of the screen. Adults often hide behind other items or excuses. If one is afraid of the outcome of an effort, the fear may be manifest in procrastination.

Open mouth

The mouth is usually open when a person is having high fear. The idea is to give a symbolic primal scream, even if the sound is inaudible. People in fear do not look tight lipped, instead they normally will be showing their teeth.

In a business environment, be alert to less obvious, but symbolically equivalent signs of fear in a person. Reach out to determine the nature of the fear and attempt to engage the person in some dialog about it.

The verbalization of fear and the brainstorming of ways to mitigate the angst are both ways to calm the person down. Helping another person who is in mild fear regain his equilibrium is an excellent way to build rapport and trust.

Adults develop patterns to help them deal with fear in ways that may not show in overt body language. They use compensating actions, and if you can recognize these signs, you can address the underlying cause to help the person, even though no specific physical signals are evident.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Body Language" by Bob Whipple "The Trust Ambassador."