

Body Language 71

Guilt

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The body language associated with the emotion of guilt makes an interesting study.

In his wonderful program on [Advanced Body Language](#), Bill Acheson of the University of Pittsburgh has a humorous section relative to guilt. Let me start by relating the way he describes it, then give some of my own observations.

Bill's research has uncovered that out of the ten most common emotions, there is only one emotion that is conveyed more accurately by men than women. That emotion is guilt. With tongue in cheek before an audience made up of more women than men, he joked, "It turns out that women are so busy creating it, they are not getting the practice time."

To go along with Bill's research, I will be using the male pronoun for the remainder of this article. I do believe it is possible for women to convey guilt, though perhaps not as easily or frequently as men, but women can and do assume any of the body gestures in this article as well.

Just for fun, try to assume a facial gesture that conveys guilt. If you are like me, you will find it more difficult than trying to project other emotions, like sadness, happiness, fear, shock, love, etc.

Guilt is a little more elusive. Let's go into how to show guilt and how to decode it when others try to hide that emotion.

Blank stare and looking down

Generally, for a man experiencing guilt, his eyes are looking down and there is a kind of far-away look in his eyes. He is perhaps trying to cover up the facts or just does not want to face the awful truth of what he did.

In the picture above, notice the blank stare on the face of Lance Armstrong, who was caught doping and disgraced as a world class cyclist. I have not found a picture that reflects guilt better than that one.

Anxiety

When experiencing guilt, we are highly anxious. That may manifest itself in all kinds of body language cues.

In the photo, the finger in the collar is a classic form of anxiety. The literal meaning is trying to loosen the collar to get in more oxygen.

Another signal of anxiety is the wringing of hands. The person is fretting because he has to admit to something that is unpleasant.

Another gesture you might see with guilt is biting of the finger nails. This is also a sign the person is experiencing anxiety.

Holding the head

Often a person feeling guilt will instinctively hold his head with one or even both hands. The hands often are covering the eyes, because he would rather not see other people while feeling guilt.

The posture here is similar to a “woe is me” type of feeling. It is like the person is trying to ask “What have I done?”

Shaking the head from side to side

This is another form of denial. The person is scolding himself for whatever he did and shaking his head as if to say, “How could I have been so stupid?”

Part of the head shaking routine may be a decoy to deflect attention away from the thing that was done. If the person shows enough remorse, perhaps other people will cut him some slack.

Closing eyes

This is an attempt to hide in plain sight. If he cannot see out, then he can play incognito for a while and maybe figure out how to change the subject.

Summary

The gestures for expressing guilt are numerous, and it also matters what caused the guilt. An empty cookie jar would be a mild form of guilt, whereas a larceny or extramarital affair would be major and have lasting consequences.

Whenever guilt is being experienced, a loss of trust is happening as well. Since it takes a lot of effort to rebuild lost trust, it is no wonder that people try to avoid guilt if they can.

You can help a person who is feeling guilty by gently trying to get the person to talk. Verbalizing the issue is one way to begin the healing process. Just recognize that sometimes the guilty party does not want to discuss the issue yet. You need to pick your timing and approach carefully.

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