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Exasperation or Rage

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When someone is completely exasperated or enraged, it is usually easy to tell. The body language gestures are rather specific and well known.

Rage is an extreme form of anger that has a special category because the person experiencing it nearly loses all control of her body. The extreme gestures of exasperation or rage are usually short lived and give way to more typical expressions of anger.

Here are a few things to look out for when dealing with an exasperated person.

Puffed out Cheeks

The genesis of this gesture is an exhale but with a closed mouth so the cheeks puff out. Of course, the steam coming out of her ears is imagined, but the look is unmistakable. This person is really upset.

Followed by open mouth with verbal gasp

The mouth opens and the person shows her teeth as she either screams or just gasps. The connotation here is that whatever happened to her is so extreme that she cannot imagine how to contain her anger and finds it hard to find adequate words to describe the situation rationally.

Hand gestures

With a person who is exasperated, the hands are usually involved in the body language. Usually you will see both hands extended in front of the sternum with fingers rigidly curved as if the person is holding two invisible grapefruits. This symbolic gesture is a visual signal that the exasperated person needs to be restrained so as to not strangle the person causing her the angst.

Hands to face

The secondary gesture may also include hands to the face. The person would put both hands to her cheeks as she tries to restrain herself. Another form would have the

person putting her hands on the top of her forehead as if she is trying to keep her skull from exploding due to the extreme pressure.



Eyes, eyebrows, and neck

The most common gesture with the eyes and eyebrows is a furrowing of the brows to reflect anger.

Another common gesture is a complete wide-eyed show of rage. A person who is totally enraged may have bulging eyes that look like they are about to pop out of the face.

In this picture we also see obvious bulging ligaments in the neck, which is a common occurrence with rage.

An exasperated person will often roll her eyes in disbelief. It is like she is saying “How can you be so stupid?”

Pointing

If the object of her anger is right there, you may see pointing with the index finger or a rigid vertical hand as she starts to verbalize what is upsetting her so much.

What to do when another person shows exasperation

People at this extreme need space to come to grips with what is going on inside. They need to feel heard, even if that cannot say a word. They often need time before they can speak. They are also looking for some form of response, but you need to be careful how you respond.

The first thing to do is not escalate the situation by mirroring the body language of the person expressing rage. Remain calm and let the other person blow off the initial steam without any comment. In this moment, it is so tempting to fight back, but that almost always makes things worse.

Think about being kind and caring at this moment. Don't brush aside the whole thing, but also try to not appear condescending. Do not belittle her for losing control. Let the enraged person have her full say and consider carefully what response would de-escalate the situation.

By remaining calm, you take the fuel away from the anger of the exasperated person, but recognize that in some circumstances remaining calm can further enrage the person, so you need to read the body language accurately to know how to respond. It may be helpful to allow a cooling off period before trying to make a difference.

Once the person has regained composure, ask open ended questions to draw her out. Once she has expressed the root cause of the problem, then she may be able to hear and consider some ideas for how to move forward.

I think it helps to acknowledge the other person's situation and show as much empathy as you can, once you are convinced the person is ready for dialog. If the situation were reversed, you might have had a similar reaction. By this method you can talk the other person down to earth and begin a constructive conversation of how to address the problem in a mature and rational way.

These actions will form a basis to start rebuilding trust with the other person. It may be a long way back to full trust, but you have to start with the proper baby steps.

Things to avoid doing

Do not go on the defensive or walk out. Do not attack or blame the person experiencing exasperation or rage. Refrain from snide remarks or making character assassinations.

Do not block the other person from expressing herself. Do not bully her into talking if she is not yet ready to talk. Don't crowd the person; give her space. Refrain from dismissing the person.

The other side of the equation

The other side is what is going on inside the person who is witnessing the rage of another person. Someone expressing rage may be a trigger to those who have been abused in prior situations with someone else, like a parent or abusive spouse. A set of coping mechanisms may kick in as needed.

For example, the person may completely withdraw as a means of physical protection or experience genuine terror. If she was the potential trigger for the rage she is seeing, then strong feelings of guilt or shame may surface.

Both parties must use good judgment to de-escalate the situation and regain control. Once the situation has stopped boiling over, it is a good idea to debrief the flare up to identify things to do in the future that will prevent a recurrence. If done with sensitivity and kindness, the ugly incident may become the foundation for building higher trust between the individuals involved.

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