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Contempt

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What are the telltale body language signals for a person who is expressing contempt? Most of the gestures for this particular emotion are facial, however, sometimes the hands get involved as well.

Before describing the gestures related to contempt, we need to recognize there are various forms of contempt. In this article we will deal with the gestures associated with two types of content.

First we will explore the type of contempt where one person is upset with another individual and has reached the breaking point. Second, we will cover the form of contempt where one person feels superior to the other person

The first type of contempt is an extreme form of anger. Contempt means despising someone or having total lack of respect. In a professional setting, contempt is normally directed at another individual or group. I suspect it is possible to show contempt for your broken-down car, but nobody would be around to see the gestures.

Mouth

The mouth is always involved when showing contempt, but there are various ways it can be configured. The most common mouth gesture is a deep frown. Usually the jaw is set tight as are the lips. If the person has an open mouth, then the emotion is usually rage rather than contempt. It is possible to convey contempt with a sneer where the upper lip is curled upward showing teeth.

Eyebrows

Since contempt is an extension of anger, it is logical that many of the facial cues for anger will be evident. The classic frown with the eyebrows is a good visible cue, but you need to be a bit careful. Sometimes contempt can involve a rather placid expression with the eyebrows. If that is the case, look for a squint of the eyes and a piercing gaze.

Hand gestures

The most common hand gesture with contempt is pointing. This is a classic hostile movement that is intended to focus energy on the person who is being held in contempt. Another hand gesture might involve a flat hand extended palm up as if to say “you fool, how could you be so stupid?”

A person exhibiting contempt may have folded arms or put hands on hips. These two gestures are common with all forms of anger.

What to do

When you see evidence of this form of contempt, recognize that the person has gone way beyond annoyance and even anger. If the gesture is directed toward you, there is some serious repair work to be done.

The best course is to not mirror the gestures of the other person but calmly proceed to investigate the source of the problem. Do this with a sincere desire to uncover what is happening and no trace of a condescending remark.

You want the other person to open up and tell you what he or she is thinking. Only then can you explore ways to remedy the situation. Your sincerity will be evident by what you say and your body language as you say it.

You may want to put some time between the current interface and the problem solving phase. Sometimes having a cooling off period will soften the other person’s approach, but if you want to do this, be careful to not appear to reject the emotions. Ask if it would be best to discuss this a little later and recognize the other person may insist on an immediate response from you.

Avoid becoming defensive and saying things like “you do not understand.” Those kinds of deflections will only increase the ire, because they will be interpreted as disrespect. Assume the non-verbal input is legitimate, because in the other person’s mind it is. Handle the conversation with care because often you can begin rebuilding trust right on the spot.

The other type of contempt



Here, the person believes he or she is better than the other person and shows it with body language. This is not a form of anger, but rather a strong feeling of superiority.

You do not see a frown or furrowed eye brows, in fact the body language is nearly opposite. The most obvious body language associated with

superiority is the nose and chin in the air.

The message is “I’m too good to even talk to you.” Curiously, contempt can also be manifest by looking down one’s nose at another person.

The eyebrows would be level and not furrowed, and the eyes would be half shut as if to not let in more light than is necessary.

The mouth is closed and not clenched, as would be the case for contempt with anger.

What to do

When someone is giving you signals of feeling superior, there really is not a lot you can do about it. You might start reciting the Greek Alphabet, but that would only provide some comic relief. You could try to dazzle the other person by stating some obscure medical theory, but that would only play into the other person’s game.

Giving him a quick kick in the groin might feel satisfying, but it would not change his underlying problem, and it might get you killed.

The best thing to do when confronted with a person who believes he is superior is to turn around and walk away. Nothing you can say or do is going to impress a person who believes he is better than you. It is best to let the egomaniac stew in his own juice and don’t put up with the game he is playing.

Both Modes at the same time

It is conceivable that you might see both extreme anger and a feeling of superiority at the same time. In that case, you will witness a mixture of the gestures discussed in this article. The person will show obvious disdain while also be on the verge of exploding with rage.

Wrap up

Contempt can come in lots of forms. In this article we have discussed the two primary forms of contempt and the body language gestures associated with them. See if you can think of other flavors contempt, and send me a note on them.

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