

Body Language 8

Chin Gestures

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



When people touch their chin, it can mean a number of different things depending on gender and exactly how the chin is touched. For example, when a male holds his chin between the bent forefinger and thumb, it usually means the man is listening intently. Chin propping is thought to be good listening behavior for a male, according to Bill Acheson of the University of Pittsburgh. Men also are usually listening when they are stroking their facial hair slowly.

Females will also stroke their chin, but not nearly as often as men, and they more likely have an open hand rather than a closed one.

Another aspect of touching the chin is that doing so blocks an attack to the throat from the front. It may be an unconscious protective gesture in some circumstances when a person is feeling vulnerable. The protection is largely symbolic, but that happens frequently in body language, and it is important to consider the symbolism that may be in play. The need for this protection may spring from a perceived lack of trust between you and the other person.

Holding the chin also keeps the head from moving. Suppose you are negotiating with a car salesman and are listening intently. You want to hear all the points being made, but you do not want to indicate agreement by head nodding until you have all the information. Holding the chin would make it less likely for you to give out premature information on your state of mind. It adds a subconscious layer of security when you may be feeling vulnerable.



When someone of either gender reverses the hand and puts the chin in the palm of the hand, holding up the head, it is a sign of fatigue or boredom. The implication is that the person needs to hold his or her head up or it will fall onto the table.

Teachers frequently see this body language in the classroom. When I see several students holding their heads up, I know it is time to break things up with a physical activity or an actual break to use the facilities. When just one person is assuming the position, the signal is much weaker. Perhaps this student stayed up all night last night to finish her paper and is simply tired.

Jutting the chin in a specific direction is a kind of pointing motion that directs other people where you want them to look. It is a way to acknowledge a transfer of attention. The chin is raised in a quick jerking motion. This is less obvious than pointing with a finger, and it is less susceptible to being interpreted as a hostile gesture.

The angle of the chin can be important as well. Generally, when the chin is raised, it is a positive sign. It is often a gesture indicating pride or alertness. Conversely when a person has his chin down, it will indicate a negative mindset. The person may be sad or depressed when the chin angle is downward.

Pay more attention to the signals you see relative the chin. As you study body language, there are many important but fleeting gestures with the chin that contain information about the mental state of another person. It is just one small part of an amazing language that we all use but rarely talk about consciously. The more adept you are at decoding the language the more astute you will become at interpersonal relations.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Body Language." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/Bodylanguage or on this blog.

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