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Playing With the Hair

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Some people fiddle with their hair while listening. Some even twirl their hair while speaking. The habit is highly individualized and can have many meanings. I will start with the most common connotation and then branch out to other meanings that have been ascribed to the gesture. There is some cultural bias in the tendency to manipulate the hair. Of course, you will not see it among women who live in cultures where the head is covered.

While the gesture is more commonly observed in women, it can also be practiced by men. For example, I knew one manager who would immediately start to twirl his curly hair in a particular place the moment a conversation took on a tone of visiting or chatting. He did not do it in technical or serious conversation, but the minute things became informal, his finger would start working that spot on his head. The implication was that it was his way to signal a relaxed state where he could let down his guard a bit.

One thing to observe when a person is fussing with his or her hair is what type of conversation is occurring or what the situation is. If the person typically does this in only one kind of conversation, like my male friend above, it is a habitual comfortable gesture that may not have a lot of meaning. However, if a person rarely does this, then all of a sudden starts combing her hair with her fingers, something of significance is going on. Look for other accompanying BL signals to find out what is happening.

The more common hair twirling I have seen is among women with long hair. They will pull it aside and sometimes grab a small lock of hair to wrap around a finger. I know one woman who did this nearly constantly when in a classroom setting. She would pull the hair and get a small bunch so she could examine the ends of the hair, seemingly inspecting it for splitting. I never asked her about the habit, and, since she did it so frequently, I did not ascribe any special meaning when she did it.

The most common reason for playing with the hair is that it is a self-soothing or calming activity. It can be interpreted as somewhat mysterious and give opportunities for other accompanying gestures like tossing one's head to make the hair go where it is wanted. The gesture can also be a kind of flirting gesture in some circumstances. The best advice is to look for accompanying other body language signals.

People will use flipping of the hair as a way to signal a transition or anxiety. It is like the person wants you to know to move on to another topic. The implication is that the

person is putting the hair back in its normal pattern and ready to start over. Some women use this gesture quite a lot, like more than once a minute. It is a habit. For example, Mary Travers of Peter, Paul, and Mary fame used to fling her long blond hair several times a minute while singing, especially during the upbeat songs.

Men and women with very long bangs will often flip the hair out of their eyes or brush it aside so they can see clearly. In some cases, the gesture is so frequent that the person might be better off cutting the offending hair an inch or so.

I have seen women in a classroom setting put a lock of their hair under their nose, presumably to get a whiff of the fragrance in her shampoo. I sometimes thought the gesture was a way to concentrate on the lecture, but I was never sure about that.



Some women and men also like to pull their hair back into a pony tail configuration, even if they don't have a desire to actually make a pony tail at the moment. This gesture puts the hair in an organized fashion and away from the face. It also gives the area usually covered up by hair some chance to get in fresh cooler air.

With men, the most common gesture with the hair is to use the fingers to comb back the hair on the opposite side of the head from the part to keep the longer hair out of their eyes. When a man is nervous, he will make this gesture much more often.

The gestures with our hair are much more common than we realize. Start keeping track of what other people are doing with their hair and see if you can gain some insight into what is going on with them. It is a kind of game you can play without the other person being aware of your observations.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Body Language." The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.

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