

## Body Language 46

### Clenched Teeth

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The gesture of clenching teeth is well known and seems very simple. It is a way to show anger or aggression. As with many gestures, the more you think about and study it, the more interesting it becomes.

For sure, the classic meaning of clenched teeth is similar to what a dog does when it growls and shows its teeth. It is a warning sign to back off or risk being hurt.

Let's look at some alternative meanings and also some of the collateral facial signs that go along with clenching teeth.

#### **Struggle or annoyance**

You might observe a man clenching his teeth when he is trying to put up a tent in the rain. Here, there is no other person to whom hostility can be directed, but still there is a struggle.

You might also observe a woman clenching her teeth when she receives the third unwanted robocall this hour interrupting her work each time. In this case, it is a system annoyance that is causing exasperation within the woman. She is not really angry at the specific person on the phone.

#### **Tension, worry, or pain**

It is common to see students waiting to take a final exam with clenched teeth. There is no anger involved, but there is real anxiety.

A person waiting in a hospital emergency room for test results to come back might have clenched teeth. I will confess to being an example of that last spring when I had a kidney stone.

#### **Signal to back off**

Here the person just wants space or time to sort things out. If he is feeling pressure, he may clench his teeth to signal the other person to back off and give some time.

On the playground, if one child is feeling bullied and wants the other kid to go away, the clenched teeth might signal that. Also, clenched teeth might be used by the bully in an attempt to intimidate the other kids.

### **Talking through your teeth**

When a person is extremely angry, he or she may talk through clenched teeth. This person is trying to signal how upset he or she is at the moment.

### **Habitual facial posture**

Many people grind their teeth while asleep and need to wear protective devices to keep them from wearing down their teeth. The habit is involuntary and is not associated with any particular stimulus.

### **Collateral facial indications**

Often when a person clenches his teeth, his jaw muscle pops out and becomes round and red. I noticed this in a former supervisor of mine. I could always tell when he was clenching his jaw by looking at that muscle.

Flared nostrils along with clenched teeth is a likely sign of anger. Also, the temples often bulge when teeth are clenched.

All of these ideas are pretty well known, but it still remains for you to figure out the specific reason a person is clenching his or her teeth. Try to look for the collateral facial signals to develop a cluster. That will greatly enhance the accuracy of your understanding.

*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.*