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Embarrassment

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



We have all experienced embarrassment at some point in our lives. It is part of the human condition, and it cannot be avoided. There are an infinite number of reasons for being embarrassed. I will describe some typical categories of embarrassment, and reveal some typical body language signals that often accompany it.

If you are the embarrassed person, then recognize you are probably making these gestures without even being aware of them. If you are conscious of your own body language, you may be able to be less obvious about your embarrassment.

If you are witnessing a friend who is embarrassed, then recognize the symptom from these gestures and see if you can help the other person feel less shame. Exactly how you go about that depends on the relationship you have with the other person and your own Emotional Intelligence to do or say things that are helpful. That approach will build more trust with the other person.

You did something unwise

This is the garden variety of embarrassment. It occurs when someone points out that you just did something stupid, or when you just realize it yourself. The body language signals include blushing, lowering the chin, sometimes a shiver, slight raising of the shoulders, mouth expression pulled back on both sides. The sum of body language expressions is to make yourself look as small as possible.

The other response is to cover the mouth and eyes with your hands, as in the picture. It is like you are trying to disappear from sight.

You are late

When you arrive at a meeting that has already started or you are otherwise late for an event, you likely experience some form of embarrassment. In most cases you will attempt to sneak in and sit down with as little fanfare as possible. Sometimes you are forced to make a public apology and try to explain your tardiness with some feeble excuse. It is best to just admit your mistake and try very hard to not make a habit of it.

If you are habitually late for commitments, it will lower the trust that other people have in you. In extreme cases people may start referring to you as, “The late George Peters” behind your back. That’s not a good thing.

You are caught taking the last cookie

Food, and consuming too much of it, are often the cause of some embarrassment. You go ahead and eat the cookie, but you really don’t enjoy it very much. You are trying hard to make the evidence disappear as soon as you can.

Realize that people are generally observing the actions of others, and trying to sneak some extra good stuff will lower their trust in you.

You forget someone’s name

This is a common cause for embarrassment that all of us experience from time to time. The level of embarrassment is significantly higher if you know the other person well and just forget the name for a moment. Normally, at a time like this you will make leading gestures for the other person to talk so the tension can be broken. As the other person talks, you often will remember the name and say it at the earliest possible moment.

Don’t get hung up if you occasionally do this, just recognize it happens to all people. Others will cut you some slack unless you keep doing the same thing.

Personally, I find some names trip me up more than others, When I find a person whose name I tend to forget, I try to create an analogy or connection that leads me to the name. For example, I once knew a person named Jack, and I often would struggle when reaching for his name. I started picturing him having a flat tire and needing a car jack to fix it.

You did something that you immediately know is wrong

In these situations, it is common to bang your forehead with the palm of one hand. The connotation is that you are trying to knock some sense into your brain while you ask yourself, “how could I be so stupid?”

You trip or walk in a funny way

Here the problem is one of balance. You are trying to act distinguished and composed, but you just nearly fell flat on your face because you tripped over your own feet. In these cases, it is normal to make a kind of shrug motion and put on a silly face, like a clown. The connotation is “What additional clumsy motions can I find to entertain you?”

The same body language occurs when you make a clumsy move while dancing or making a grand entrance down a spiral staircase. You may try to act like a buffoon to get out of the embarrassment.

Your fly is down

Clothing malfunctions provide endless opportunities for you to be embarrassed. You make the correction but try to do it with as little fanfare as possible. Then you quickly change the subject.

When you notice a clothing issue with another person, it is often best to just ignore it unless you know the person very well. Use the golden rule when deciding whether or not to suggest a correction. Ask yourself if the situation were reversed, would you want the other person to tell you that your shoe is untied?

You spilled the gravy

Often embarrassment can occur at the dining table as you are trying to act refined but the soup dribbles down your chin onto the tablecloth. The general reaction to this is to distract people from focusing on you. You try to deflect attention in a different direction while you clean yourself up and move a dish to cover the spot on the tablecloth.

I was once at a formal luncheon, and someone asked me to pass the salad dressing. As I picked up the dressing, I was paying more attention to the conversation and did not recognize that the dressing was in a gravy boat that was on a tray. The vessel was top heavy with the dressing, and the whole thing tipped over, splashing the dressing all over the table, and several of the people sitting near me. Now that is embarrassing!

There are hundreds of examples in life where we have to deal with embarrassment. The best advice is to recognize that everyone else in the room has experienced these problems at some point. Just get through the awkward moment and do not dwell on the mistake. Unless you habitually do clumsy things, most people will cut you some slack.

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