

## Body Language 77

### Compassion

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When a person is expressing compassion, what are the typical body language gestures you are likely to see that go with the emotion?

The most recognizable signs are a pleasant facial expression with perhaps a tinge of concern and slow gracious hand gestures. Let's pick apart the various signals to clarify what makes them unique to compassion.

The first part of the article will be about recognizing a person who is showing compassion. After that, I will deal with ways we can show compassion to others and some traps to avoid.

Keep in mind that the body language signals of a person showing compassion will be highly influenced by what is causing the person to feel compassionate. If it is responding to another person, or even a family pet, who is hurting, the gestures will be similar to those of empathy. If the person showing compassion is simply listening to another person gripe, the gestures will be more consistent with patience.

#### **The face**

The person's eyes will be soft with no hint of agitation. The eyebrows will be neither raised nor furrowed. They will be in a natural and neutral position. Alternatively, the corrugator muscles may pull the eyebrows in and up, thus giving the appearance of some concern. This configuration can easily be confused as sadness, because sad eyes have the same look.

The mouth may have a slight smile, or at least not a frown. The cheeks will be high, and the entire face will show an expression of a person who is listening. A compassionate person is in a heightened state of awareness and connectivity with the other person. Depending on the circumstances, the lips may be pressed together in sympathy.

#### **Head**

The head will either be erect or slightly tilted downward. If the person is in a listening mode, you will probably notice good following skills such as frequent head nodding. You

may also witness a slow shaking of the head from side to side as an indication that the person is finding the pain of another hard to comprehend.

## **Hand gestures**

There are many different hand gestures that go along with compassion depending on the situation. The person might put fingers to the mouth in contemplation.

You might see arms extended with both palms facing upward and the fingers slightly curled. This is a signal of openness and caring. You would not see closed fists as a way to express compassion.

## **Touching rituals**

For people who know each other well, there may be a hand placed on the forearm of the other person as an indication of support. Keep in mind that in all circumstances, it is wise to refrain from any physical contact other than shaking hands unless you know the other person very well.

You might witness a compassionate person holding both hands of a loved one in front of the sternum.

I recall having a painful bicycle accident as a youth, and my mother rushed to my side and gave me the kind of hug that only a mother can. It was very comforting to know that she felt my pain. I believe that mothers are the most compassionate people in the world, and they have a way of expressing it that is unmistakable.

## **Relation to trust**

It is hard to show true compassion to a person who you do not trust at all. On the flip side, extending trust to another person is a great way to demonstrate compassion and build higher trust with that person for the future. It goes along with what I call the "First Law of Trust," which is "if you are not satisfied with the level of trust you are receiving from other people, you need to show more trust in them." Trust is a reciprocal phenomenon.

Recognize that compassion is not something that can be faked. You can extend trust, but you cannot convey compassion unless it is genuine.

## **When a person is ill**

Compassion shows up as a frequent gesture when people visit someone who is in the hospital. In this case, the individual is usually in bed and the person showing compassion will sit in a chair next to the bed to listen and offer comfort.

Nurses and other medical personnel will go about their duties but with a kind and soothing flow that indicates respect and empathy.

## **Summary**

The gestures for showing compassion are significantly influenced by the circumstances going on as well as the relationship between the two people. There are many different expressions that can show compassion and empathy. To obtain an accurate reading of the gestures, look for a cluster of signals that all point in the same direction.

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