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Shy

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Most people will have times in life when they feel shy. It is not a negative thing to exhibit some insecurity in certain situations. We all experience this. The body language of a person who is feeling shy is usually rather easy to decode.

In most cases the person will be trying to avoid being noticed. You may see a child cover her eyes or hide under a coat or blanket.

The gestures associated with being shy are easier to spot in young children than in adults. My guess is that as people mature, they develop ways of disguising insecurity and have coping mechanisms to be able to function successfully in the world.

Let's examine some other gestures that may be operational here and see if there is a common thread.

The person may hide by stepping behind a door and peeking around the edge. Sometimes you can see a person wearing a hat pull the brim down to hide the face. The idea is to get behind or under something.

Another manifestation of being shy can be the position of the hands. A shy person will sometimes have his hands folded together and sometimes he will be moving them back and forth in front of his body. This is also a contraction movement trying to appear smaller than he actually is.



If the eyes are not covered, most likely the person is looking down and has her chin lowered as in the attached picture.

I found numerous different mouth configurations when looking at photos of shy people. There was not enough of a central theme to constitute a trend. The mouth could be open or shut. It could be symmetrical or pulled to the side. The person could be smiling or frowning, although I saw more examples of a smile than a frown. The mouth area was also frequently covered by the fingers.

What to do

You can help a shy person open up, but it can be a delicate dance, because if you come on too strong, it may be interpreted as a form of put down for the person. The best approach is to let the person know you are sincerely interested in her opinion without talking down to her.

Here is an example of an approach that is too direct. “Alice, you have not said anything in the meeting so far. We want to know what you are thinking.” A softer approach might sound like this. “Let’s hear from some of the other people to broaden our discussion.” When using this approach, avoid looking directly at the person you want to open up.

The person may feel bullied or not treated well by others. Sometimes a leader may exacerbate the situation by letting unkind remarks go unchecked. A hostile environment may be very subtle, and what seems like an innocent remark may be taken the wrong way. The best way to avoid that kind of problem is to have a rule that our team will not make jokes at the expense of other team members.

Avoid commenting on the appearance of a shy person. He wants to remain as hidden from view as possible, so calling attention to him in any way will make things worse for him. The best approach is to get him to share something and honor that with an affirming comment that is not heavy, judgmental, or insincere.

A person who tends to feel shy may do better in a one-on-one situation. You may be able to get the person to feel more confident by spending some time with him. Once you have built a strong rapport with the person, then he will be more inclined to open up when you are both with other people.

A person who is shy may also be highly sensitive. The two concepts are different but are often found in one person. A sensitive person can be a real asset, because he or she can often pick up subtle clues and give insights into how the rest of the group, or a specific person, is reacting to something.

Times of insecurity happen to all of us, and for different reasons. Learn to live through these moments and contribute your ideas as soon as possible.

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