

## Relationship Advice: The Power of Speaking without Words

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

"I'm always amazed at how much my wife is able to communicate with a subtle glance or a particular tilt of her head. Within a second I know if she's happy, sad, playful or annoyed, and usually I'm able to tell if I contributed to her reaction in some way..." ~Steven, married three years

"Whenever my boyfriend is stressed or angry, I can tell. He holds his body differently and his energy changes. I know to give him space at these moments..." ~Gina

"I knew my girlfriend was still mad. She kept saying, 'I'm over it,' but she was having trouble looking at me and when I touched her she seemed tense..." ~Lars

### The power of body language

Imagine that you typically say "I love you" to your husband before you go to bed each night. On one particular evening, you feel annoyed with him over an argument you had earlier that day. But out of routine, you still say "I love you" as you both get ready for bed. This time, however, the message is different. Your tone suggests frustration and your words are barely audible. You avoid physical closeness and eye contact. And your body is rigid and tight. For your husband, the strongest part of your message will most likely be the nonverbal cues that surround your words.

There are many different ways to communicate with your loved one. We are all familiar with the most common form of expression: language. Statements like "I can't imagine my life without you" or "I'd appreciate you helping around the house" clearly inform the listener of the sender's intention. Did you know, however, that you often send your partner messages that do not involve words? These nonverbal messages can be subtle or dramatic. You might be conscious of the signals you're giving off but, if you're like most of us, you're probably unaware of all the messages you send your partner.

How is this relevant to your relationship? Simple: Your nonverbal forms of communication have a powerful impact on your partner and therefore on your relationship's intimacy overall. The subtle and not-so-subtle messages you send can leave your partner feeling loved and close to you or these messages can make her feel unwanted and anxious. And all this occurs above and beyond the words that you speak.

### How do you communicate?

Here's a brief list of how you might be communicating with your partner even when you're not talking:

~**Tone of voice.** The real message is not in the words, but in how they are spoken.

~**Facial expression.** Your face can reveal most of your emotions, including acceptance and judgment.

~**Eye contact.** Your eyes tell others whether or not you're interested in what they have to say. When you're mad or disgusted with your partner, you may avoid or prematurely break eye contact.

~**Touch.** Different types of touch convey a wide range of messages and feelings. Touch can be an effective way to communicate warmth and love.

~**Silence.** You can say a great deal by remaining silent. Deciding not to speak when your partner needs a hug can be extra supportive and can let him/her know that you're really listening; withholding words when your partner needs to hear a loving sentiment sends the opposite message.

~**Gestures.** "Talking" with your hands, widening your eyes, lifting your eyebrows, etc., can add emphasis to your message.

~**Body Language.** Crossing your arms when feeling judgmental or turning away from your partner when you become defensive are just two examples of how our bodies speak for us.

~**Interpersonal Distance.** The physical distance you place between you and your lover sends an important message. You might move away from your partner when you're frustrated with her/him or move closer when you're offering support or listening intently.

### **What is your non-verbal communication style?**

Some people use touch to convey emotion. Still others express a great deal in their tone of voice and body language. Do you rely on a particular form of nonverbal communication? Would it enrich your relationship to add one of the nonverbal forms of communication in the list above to your relationship toolbox? If so, try adding just one method and practice it often. Before you know it, it will become an automatic part of your communication repertoire. Start slowly and gradually, especially if your partner isn't used to you acting in a certain way.

For instance, if you plan on increasing the amount of touch in your relationship to demonstrate more affection, start by holding your partner's hand while watching a TV. Or while conversing over dinner, you can casually touch her forearm at some point in the discussion to emphasize your reaction. Small behaviors such as touch are powerful and, over time, improve the emotional climate of your relationship.

An important step in effective communication is to begin to notice your body language—you may be speaking volumes with your body without even realizing it.

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### **Author Bio**

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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