

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR TEENS AND ADULTS

Designed for people with facial differences

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From the moment vision enters a newborn's life, the infant instinctively stares at – the face. Why? Because the face provides vital information – it is the infant's first access point to learning about the world. A smiling, warm and loving face tells the baby that the world is a good place and, by association so is he or she. A cold, withdrawn, depressed face signals danger in the world and again, by primitive association, the infant experiences feelings of being ill at ease and the need to be vigilant.

All through life, we are communicating via our facial expression, the eye contact we do or do not make, the cues our faces provide as to our mood. People look at our faces so that they can figure out how best to communicate with us and if we are listening to them. If our faces are different, they look at us even more – trying to integrate the difference as they communicate with us.

Someone with a facial difference, a child or adult who feels self-conscious about how they look, nonverbally communicates this feeling with the possibility that the entire process becomes awkward and uncomfortable. Our confidence erodes even further if we interpret the stares of others as just that – stares. We then look away, avoid eye contact and are labeled “unfriendly”...the outcome of this cycle is painful and therefore many of us choose to avoid such contact all together

Unfortunately, someone with a craniofacial condition cannot walk down the street anonymously. The looks of strangers can feel intrusive and are resented. As a result, decisions to remain at home instead become more common – but this does *NOT* have to be the solution!

USING BODY LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATE

Attention please!

Looking at a person is a clear communication signal. Smiling or signaling with your eyes that you are open and ready to make contact invites the other person to respond – in response, your look is returned and eye contact made.

The eyes have it!

Typically, eye contact lasts about 6 seconds, though at times it seems like ages! Looking at someone while they are speaking indicates that we are listening. When someone is listening to *us* we look at him or her less, but eye contact is very important here too – it makes the listener feel uncomfortable if you look down at the ground or off into the distance while speaking because it is hard to maintain the connection without eye contact.

Smiles speak volumes!

What is more reassuring than a smile? It says that you are approachable, friendly and ready for communication.

Notes on Nodding!

Nodding tells the speaker that you are listening and that they should continue to speak. Quickened, they signal that you are ready to speak.

Posture Please!

Head up, shoulders back communicate: “I’m confident and assertive”; slouched shoulders and eyes downcast communicate: “I’m feeling self conscious”. Ironically, the latter *attracts* attention to you, rather than helping you avoid it!

When Your Face Can’t Smile

If part of your face is paralyzed, it may make your one-sided smile feel bad to you; if you only have one eye, eye contact can be difficult. Some times smiling inside has to do – and that’s fine as long as you say so! Half a smile or our eyes alone can speak volumes!

Stumped by Speech?

If your speech is unclear because of a craniofacial condition and it is harder for you to be understood, then it’s even more important to look directly at the person to whom you are speaking. Using as much enthusiasm and expression as you can – your message will still get across!

THE ART OF CONVERSING

Beginnings

It can all begin with a comment about the weather or anything else that is going on in the environment that you are sharing with the person with whom you would like to speak. Or, if you’re both at

the same party how does he/she know the host? FIND OUT
WHAT YOU HAVE IN COMMON AND START WITH THAT!

Questions

Ask one. Look at the other person's appearance for a clue to ask a question about them – “Where did you get that great tie?” or “I love your bracelet, is it Indian?” Questions FOCUS THE ATTENTION ON THE OTHER PERSON!

Being asked. Most often, your face will be the clue that others use to start a conversation with you. If this makes you self-conscious, just remember coming from someone who doesn't know you, questions make sense.

Try to use WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY and HOW at the beginning of your questions so that the answers you get are more than one word! “YES” or “NO” ANSWERS DON'T GIVE YOU MUCH MILEAGE!

Keep it going. Listen, show you're interested and share your own experiences or view point. Ask a question. Wait for the reply. Make a comment on the reply BEFORE you ask the next question. LET IT ROLL!

For a Change

If your listener's body language (lack of eye contact, fidgeting) tells you “BORING” or if you're running out of fuel on a topic, CHANGE IT! If the conversation is moving along, LET IT BE!

Joining In: a 2-Step Approach

Step 1 – LISTEN to what the existing conversation is about. Think about what you can add (like your opinion or additional information)

Step 2 – TIME IT RIGHT; if there is a lull or pause in the conversation, join in! If there isn't, use what you know like eye contact, nodding your head and then stepping forward into the group and wait for your cue (eyes on you) to begin speaking. TRY NOT TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT – YET!

It does not *have* to be your face

Everyone has trouble talking to someone new. The awkwardness that you feel may just reflect weak communication skills and have *nothing* to do with your face.

Do Your Homework

Prepare for social situations. Who will be there? What may their interests be? Politics, sports, cultural events...newspaper headlines – all are handy to have at the tip of your tongue!

WHAT HAPPENS IF...

You're asked about your face

There's no avoiding it – at some point, someone *is* going to ask you about your face. So BE PREPARED! How much you share depends on the circumstances and people involved. Most people need only a brief explanation. *A question denotes interest, not hostility.*

You feel like taking control

Go ahead! Bring your face up in conversation yourself. You can employ humor, an interesting anecdote or a straightforward statement.

Someone's stare gazing

We stare at the stars and they twinkle back. People stare at you (not to be confused with a look of interest when they are talking with you) and you don't feel like twinkling! You need to take control by showing your awareness and putting out a request that it stop. It is then your turn to look directly at the person staring at you. Give them a smile or nod of recognition. If they don't get the message, let your face show your displeasure! Humor can be a handy helper at these times "You should see me on a bad day!". How you handle staring depends on how you feel at the time - you're not locked into any one behavior. Sometimes you'll simply want to walk away at other times you'll feel more assertive and want to speak up.

Comments anyone?

Like staring, rude or inappropriate comments about your face are hurtful. Let the person who made the comment know that you heard it. Sometimes an assertive look does the trick. Or you may choose to make light of it or address it with humor or something else that makes you feel empowered but that does not fuel an argument.