

A leg up and a step ahead: what feet say about you, others

Two of your colleagues stand in a hallway, feet pointed to each other, chatting away. You walk by and greet the pair, wishing to join the conversation. Should you? Will you be seen as an interruption or welcome addition? The answer, experts say, lies with the feet.

Joe Navarro, a former FBI interrogator credited with catching scores of criminals by watching their body language, identifies the feet as the most honest part of the human body. Starting in childhood, he explains, we're taught to lie with our faces. "Don't make that face,' our parents growl when we react to the food placed in front of us," he writes in *What Every Body Is Saying*. "At least look happy when your cousins stop by,' ... and you learn to force a smile." Dr. Carol Kinsey Goman, a fellow body language expert, writes in her blog that rarely is anyone coached in body language below the waist. As a result, our legs and feet are left unrehearsed and unfiltered, unlike our words and facial expressions. And so, despite the best poker face we can muster, our feet say a lot.

Back to the hallway conundrum, the twosome will react in one of two ways: If they do not wish to engage you in conversation (but still want to be courteous), they'll merely rotate at the hips to greet you without moving their feet. "We do this subconsciously," says Navarro. "If we actually wanted [the outsider] to join the conversation, our feet would move to create a triad to welcome them into our space."

Put simply, our feet point toward people or situations we like and feel comfortable with, and away from the source of discomfort.

Why is that? Blame it on your limbic brain: As the control center of our emotional responses, its job is to react quickly — prior to thought — when faced with danger or discomfort. It's the mechanism that regulates the age-old freeze, flight or fight responses hardwired in every one of us. According to Navarro, when presented with something dangerous or disagreeable, our feet and legs still react to protect us as they did in prehistoric times: "First, they freeze, then they attempt to distance and, finally, if no other alternative is available, they prepare to fight and kick." And, while some speculate these reflexes hinge on cultural influences, studies show that even people who were born blind exhibit the same behaviors, worldwide.

In the hallway scenario, you'll know your conversation partner is ready to move on when he angles one foot away from you, making an "L" formation with his feet. Whether he's bored, has to go to the bathroom or catch another appointment, the foot pointed outward is an accurate barometer that he wishes to end the conversation and take his leave. "The person's torso may remain facing you out of social diligence," Navarro writes, "but the feet may more honestly reflect the limbic brain's need or desire to escape."

We also see this human tendency to distance our feet when romantic relationships go sour. In his audio series, *The Power of Body Language*, Navarro tells us he's helped clinicians better navigate couple's therapy sessions by watching the couple's feet. Are the feet pointed away and refusing to go near each other? "Therapists see couples who'll sleep in the same bed but not allow their feet near each other," says Navarro. "It's very indicative of a bad relationship."

Beyond our comfort level around others, our stance also reflects our comfort level with ourselves. In general, feet that stand at shoulder's width (or slightly narrower for women) communicate confidence, and even dominance — which is why nonverbal experts recommend women adopt that stance when presenting or leading group discussions. By contrast, feet that stick close together denote low confidence and a demure, submissive disposition. Experts only recommend the feet-together stance in situations that require a display of reverence, like funerals and meetings with authority figures such as the President or the Dalai Lama.

Not long ago, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to both strengthen and broadcast Russia's support for Syria's bloody crackdown of dissidents. Dr. Jack Brown — another body language expert — describes the meeting in his blog, *Body Language Success*: “The Syrian's feet and legs are very close together, in a configuration typical of an acquiescing, beta persona. Moreover, al-Assad's feet are pointed at Lavrov, showing us that he holds the Russian in high respect.” Meanwhile, the Russian's feet are crossed at the ankles and pointed away from al-Assad. Reminding us that the subconscious points our feet away from those we dislike or disrespect, Brown concludes, “it is very obvious who needs whom here.”

Not only does our body broadcast our emotions, but it can also change them. Amy Cuddy, a professor and researcher at Harvard Business School, explored the phenomenon in a study that revealed a two-minute change in body positions can alter testosterone and cortisol levels in the brain, impacting our feelings and, ultimately, other people's perceptions of us. At a 2012 TED Global conference, Cuddy told the audience such physiological changes can lead to meaningful life outcomes, such as whether we get picked for a promotion, a date, or targeted for a lawsuit. “Our bodies change our minds,” she explained, “and our minds can change our behavior, and our behavior can change our outcomes.”

Through her research, Cuddy learned that adopting a power pose for two minutes — feet apart, chest out, hands on hips, in a stance the media dubbed “Wonder Woman” — changes your hormonal levels and brain configuration to be assertive, confident and comfortable. The opposite is also true: Adopting a low-power, closed-off stance causes the brain to feel stressed and run down. (Other experts add that a tight, feet-together pose hinders the fluidity of thought and speech.)

Armed with her research findings, Cuddy now teaches the power pose technique (or two-minute body hack, as she calls it) to those plagued by anxiety or self-doubt. “It's not a matter of fake it till you *make* it,” she says, “but fake it till you *become* it.”

For the best foot forward in reading or influencing behavior, step up your fluency in the language of feet.