



# BACK IN TOUCH

Using the Power of Body Language to  
Connect Through COVID

LINDA CLEMONS

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Connection During COVID: Why Nonverbal Communication Is Essential*

In early 2020, the coronavirus pandemic abruptly brought life as we knew it to a halt, separating us from friends, family, and colleagues. Over the next year and a half, our usual way of interacting was disrupted as we learned the ropes of social distancing, figured out how to work remotely, and scrambled for masks that covered more than half of the forty-three muscles we use to create some ten thousand different facial expressions. As a body language expert who speaks to thousands of people each year about the power of nonverbal communication, I saw how COVID altered that communication and affected our relationships, careers, and psychological well-being. Measures that were necessary to curb the spread of the virus and keep us safe, like lockdown and social distancing, impeded our ability to fully connect with one another. Technology bridged the gap to an extent, but FaceTime and Zoom are no substitute for face-to-face interaction. It's clear that COVID-19 will be with us for a while and there is an opportunity to learn something from what we have endured during this difficult time. As a body language expert, I want to help you seize this moment to overcome obstacles to effective communication, using nonverbal communication to understand others with more insight, and empower yourself at work, at home, and in your community.

Each person's experience of the pandemic is varied, depending on a number of factors. I have noticed that some introverts, who may be good one-on-one but not so great in group settings, seem to be more open to putting themselves out there after extended time with limited exposure to the outside world (especially where infection numbers are low, as you might expect). Extroverts, on the other hand, who had to contend with all the imposed "quiet time," may have gained some insight into how to be in a space without feeling they have to fill it with social interaction and conversation. We are discovering that people are pretty adaptable and resilient overall, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from the experience! On the other hand, many who were already managing issues like anxiety and depression have found those struggles magnified.

Finding our way through COVID has been a bumpy ride, and often feels like a series of starts and stops, with some frustrating and even scary twists and turns. You can benefit greatly from understanding nonverbal communication, which gives you the ability to identify and understand emotions in ourselves and others. Social distancing creates anxiety—most of us have experienced it. After a year and a half of being out of touch, we have a unique opportunity to harness the transformative power of learning to "read" what others are thinking and feeling, as well as tuning into what our own nonverbal signals communicate to others.

The pandemic was a world-changing event, giving us a once-in-a-lifetime chance to reshape our relationships and become more effective in the world, personally and professionally,

by tapping into the silent cues that are all around us. It's time to reconnect in a new and better way.

I make my career coaching C-Suite execs, rising professionals, and young people just entering the workforce on the power of nonverbals. I discovered that I had a talent for decoding nonverbals at the ripe old age of ten, which I'll tell you about in a moment. Today I am one of the few women and people of color in this field, which gives me a unique perspective. The combination of being a Black woman and an empath, someone who is naturally wired to pick up on what others are feeling, allows me to work effectively with people from a multitude of backgrounds and understand common experiences among many groups of people. My experiences as a corporate trainer and coach have allowed me to walk in the shoes of many others, and I've used my experience to gain insights into the choices people make. I often see that women whom I train tend to take the knowledge back to share with their company, while men tend to use it to compete more effectively in the professional world.

During my presentations, I sometimes ask a few audience members to stand up, and then give them an instant assessment of a few key points of their personalities, and the strengths and weaknesses of their nonverbal styles. They don't even have to say anything. After I tell them what I see—basically, I see what they're thinking—they sometimes ask me if I'm clairvoyant. I am not, but I do have insight into the most fleeting of facial expressions and what their body language is expressing. Prior to my career as a corporate trainer, my empath's ability to assess what others were feeling made me a successful salesperson who ranked at the very top of my industry year after year. I would confirm not only the information I was hearing from my buyer, but also their emotion. I was in tune with the person as I delivered my message, and they felt that and responded to it.

This same skill, which you can hone and practice, is what I use in the hundreds of presentations and workshops I do with Fortune 500 companies. The work I do ranges from teaching leaders how to use body language and tone of voice to be more effective public speakers, to coaching young adults just entering the workforce on how to nail that job interview. In this book, I will introduce you to the ideas and techniques that make up the study and use of nonverbal communication, and I will share a few of my trade "secrets" that make people wonder about my psychic ability.

It began when I was just a kid.

Back when I was ten, my school held a fundraiser for our eternally underfunded school. The student who could sell the most candy would win a brand-new bicycle. I cannot tell you how much I coveted that bike. I was the oldest of four kids and my family lived on a tight budget. If I wanted a bike, I was going to have to figure out how to win this contest, because my parents certainly didn't have the money to buy me one.

I made the rounds in my neighborhood, trying to sell my boxes of candy to anyone who would listen to my pitch. One of the people I targeted as a prospective buyer was my neighbor Mr. Washington. He was a grandfatherly type who could also be a little gruff, but I figured I'd give him a try. After hearing me out, he said, "You come back to me when you're down to your last two boxes, and I'll help you out." He was throwing down the gauntlet: If I wanted success, I had to earn it. Challenge accepted. As I knocked on door after door, I began to pick up on signals that I couldn't give a name to as a child—but that would shape my life ever after. We all have antennae for nonverbal signals, but we may not be tuned in to them. For some reason, even at age ten, I was very tapped in and picked up the signals loud and clear. Some of my neighbors who answered the door were just plain mean, and you didn't need to be a body language expert to get that. They opened their front door only partway, but that was enough to open another door of perception for me. I noticed something besides their obviously unwelcoming stance. It wasn't just the door to the house that was barely open; the door to their body was closed too. Time after time, they would fold their arms and tell me not to come back. Then they might wag their finger at me, which almost looked like the gesture you make when you mimic pointing a gun. I didn't waste much time on them.

Other people were totally different. One woman answered the door, listened to my pitch, and called back to her husband, "John, do I really need this candy?" Her body wasn't asking the same question, though. I saw her palm was open, which to my ten-year-old self seemed to be saying, "Give it to me, give it to me." Her voice had a kind tone and I knew that if I stayed there and talked long enough and honestly enough about my dreams and goals, I could get the candy money because her hands were open and her voice was sweet, even though her words were doubting. These were the simple observations of a child, but I put them to good use.

It wasn't long before I had only two boxes of candy left. I put a little barrette in my hair for good luck, thinking about that bike I wanted to win so badly, and headed back to Mr. Washington's house. I was bursting with excitement as I knocked on the door. When it opened, there stood Mrs. Washington. I launched in about Mr. Washington's promise, but before I could get very far, she said "What is he doing buying candy? He don't need that." I was shaking in my little tennis shoes, watching my dreams vanish into thin air, but something told me to keep going. I took a breath, softened my voice, looked her in the eye and said, "I think he wanted to have something as sweet as you." Her shoulders relaxed and her tone mellowed. And you know I got that bike.

For all of us who felt like COVID stamped out so much of our social interactions, this book is meant as a guide to rekindling communication in the workplace, our homes, and our communities. It's time to relight the flame.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Body Language 101: Understanding the Basics*

Before delving into an exploration of the practical steps we can take to reconnect with one another, I'd like to share some of the basics of nonverbal communication with you, starting with a brief look at how this area of knowledge came to be. It's time for a little Body Language 101, with me as your teacher.

One of the first people to study this subject is a familiar name: Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary theory. He's most famous for his books *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, but he wrote a third book, on the biological aspects of emotional life, called *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872. Darwin originally intended to include it as just a single chapter in *The Descent of Man*, but he found the topic so compelling that he began to keep a journal recording his most personal thoughts about the influence of heredity on our mental states. The book that came out of his musings explores the biology behind emotion and describes a universal nature of the expression of emotion, regardless of age, gender, race, culture, and even species.

Among his historic insights, Darwin observed that both humans and animals purse their lips when they concentrate, narrow their eyes when angry, and drop their jaws when listening intently. He believed that these commonalities were “daily, living proof of [our] animal ancestry.”<sup>1</sup> Darwin also drew on the work of Duchenne de Boulogne, a nineteenth-century neurologist who studied the physiology behind facial expressions, and whose work comes down to us today in the term “Duchenne smile,” which body language experts use to describe a genuine smile, one that involves the muscles around the eyes as well as the face and mouth.

Fast-forward to the twentieth century, when one of the experts whose work I admire most devised a revolutionary hypothesis. In 1967, the communications theorist Albert Mehrabian wrote that in specific situations he studied, the relative impact of words, tone of voice, and body language are respectively, 7 percent, 38 percent, and 55 percent. Think about those percentages. There are situations where only 7 percent of your reaction to someone will be determined by the words they say, while 38 percent will be determined by their tone of voice, and 55 percent will come from cues like body angle and facial expression. That's 93 percent nonverbal! Mehrabian's study may have looked at nonverbals in limited circumstances, but the implications were groundbreaking.

A decade later, in 1977, the famous zoologist Desmond Morris published *Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior*, which was subsequently updated and retitled *Peopewatching: A Guide to Body Language* in 2002. One of Morris's theories caught my interest: the farther away a body part is from your brain, the less control you have over what it's

revealing about you. This means that our arms and legs can say a lot about what we're feeling, and I am very attuned to people's extremities when I'm evaluating them.

These days, we acknowledge that gestures may be specific to culture. The thumbs-up gesture Americans use to mean "all's well" means "up yours" in parts of the Middle East. Crooking your finger to call someone over in the US is a deep insult in the Philippines, as the gesture is used only with dogs there. Our facial expressions, however, are genetically determined. There are seven recognized universal expressions that appear across cultures: joy, sadness, fear, surprise, anger, contempt and disgust. After years of studying faces, if you're mad at me I'm gonna know it, whether you're American, Scandinavian, or from Bora Bora.

One of the tools I use often in reading emotions is based on the work of the psychologists E.A. Haggard and K.S. Isaacs in the mid-sixties, who studied footage of people filmed during psychotherapy sessions. They discovered what they called "micro momentary expressions," which last from one-fifteenth to one-thirtieth of a second. These involuntary facial movements reveal inner emotions, and we cannot cover them up or control them. In the late sixties and early seventies, psychologist Paul Ekman, a pioneer in the study of emotions as they relate to facial expressions, who was named one of the top 100 psychologists of the twentieth century by *Time* magazine, used micro-expressions to detect when research subjects were lying. When my friends and colleagues call me a "human lie detector," I'm often using this work, among other techniques, to read someone's micro-expressions and discern what's really going on with them.

No discussion of body language would be complete without an introduction to Ray Birdwhistell, an American anthropologist who created the term *kinesics*, which is the study of expressions, gestures, posture, and movement. Expanding on Mehrabian's theory, Birdwhistell estimated that about a third of human communication, including how we determine how much we like someone, is about words. The other two-thirds of our communication comes from our nonverbals—our tone of voice, our facial expression, and what we're doing with our bodies when we talk.

Now think about the way we've been living for the past year and a half. Consider the facial cues we miss when a mask covers the lower two-thirds of our face. Consider the "head on a plate" effect of seeing colleagues or friends on a video screen. Consider the loss of our ability to use and read gestures and touch with our friends, family, and even colleagues. We have been left with some major deficits in communication, in addition to the many other challenges of the pandemic. What do you think this has done to your communication with others? Has it diminished your effectiveness at work? Have friendships withered? Have you felt sad and isolated? Have you felt suffocated by those in your household bubble? On the other hand, has distancing made you painfully aware of and longing for what you've been missing? Have you

gained a new appreciation for family members or work friends you may not have been as close with before? Can you maintain better focus and concentration on your work? You might even answer yes to all of the above.

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Let's move on to the basics of body language. Some body language is due to circumstances beyond your control, because your nonverbals are mostly instinctive reactions. They originate in primitive parts of your brain and cause physical changes in your body in response to stimuli. Have you ever wondered why, when you're walking down the street and someone who looks dodgy approaches you, you experience a certain physical response? It happens because your amygdala, the part of your brain that controls emotional responses, including fear, anxiety, and aggression, is reading that person's nonverbal cues and perceiving them as a threat (whether they are or not). The amygdala springs into action, preparing you for "fight or flight." Your pulse quickens, you breathe more heavily, you start to sweat a bit, and you may decide to cross at the corner. The brain is an interactive organ, with all the parts communicating with each other and sharing function; you can't assign thoughts and emotions to neat little sections, but your amygdala is largely responsible for those physical sensations in response to a perceived threat.

Renowned security expert Gavin de Becker, who has devised methods to protect public figures (including US presidents) from violence, calls this "the gift of fear." The amygdala can't discern between real and perceived threats or among different levels of threat, however. That means you don't have to be in a life-threatening situation for your amygdala to kick into gear—it can activate when you find yourself in steep competition with a colleague, or when someone makes your radar go off every time they're around you, even if they've done nothing overt to bother you.

That's your limbic system, the part of the brain that handles emotion and behavioral responses, scanning to see if someone is friend or foe. Blood leaves your brain and heads to your feet, so you are prepared for flight. Our most primal selves are always checking to see if there's a lion or tiger around, metaphorically speaking. Others around you will intuit that you are in survival mode, picking up on the nonverbals. People may become very still, just like prey in the wild when a predator is nearby. There may be small, abrupt changes in body language or breathing patterns that people may notice without realizing it.

When people have these gut reactions, they may play out in various ways. For example, maybe you've noticed a colleague who constantly feels the need to one-up others on your team. Say someone is praised in a meeting; this colleague might feel threatened and pipe up that they did the same thing two years earlier. That's a fight for attention, and the person may



be doing this without even being aware of what they're doing or why. Or say you stay late at the office to work on a report, making your presence known to coworkers and making sure your boss sees that you're there late. This is another nonverbal way to show that you are fighting for your position.

There's another part of your brain that I don't think gets enough love when we talk about body language. The insula, which is also called the Island of Reil (a cool name, isn't it?) is tucked away deep in the brain, and no one knew much about it until MRI imaging came along. Now that we've seen it in action, researchers think it's involved in self-awareness, how we sense both our bodies and emotions. There's a theory called the somatic marker hypothesis that says that the insula is in play when people make decisions based on physical feelings. If your amygdala made your stomach feel queasy when that person approached you on a dark street, your insula might direct you to a more well-lit area. The insula is also involved in something I consider essential to being an effective body-language reader: empathy, the ability to understand and share another person's feelings. So, props to our insulas.

I mentioned that the brain is like an interactive device, with all parts constantly in touch with one another, only they don't always agree. We all remember those cartoons where a little devil and a little angel appear on a person's shoulders and start arguing. That's a good depiction of the way the brain works sometimes. There can be opposing conversations going on between the insula and the prefrontal cortex, which handles much of the logical, reasonable part of your decision-making. In my presentations, I sometimes tell a little story about how this can play out.

Say you're trying to lose some weight so you can look good for the summer. Now imagine your prefrontal cortex saying, "You know, Linda, you're not just losing weight to look good—you're going to be healthier, and you'll live longer." But then your insula hijacks the conversation and says, "Girl, you only live once! Go ahead and have that double fudge brownie, honey." Part of experiencing empathy means being able to sense when two conflicting conversations like these are going on in someone's else head, that they are feeling ambivalent, and then using that information to connect on a deeper level, acknowledging verbally and nonverbally that you know where they are coming from.

I've found that empathy can be a powerful tool and it is a key to success in life in general. Empathy is what allowed me to be successful in every sales job I had in my past career. I would not only confirm what I heard buyers saying to me, I would confirm the emotions they were feeling. I have experienced this countless times: when I express a person's emotions back to them, I notice that they immediately seem more open to what I have to say, and I can see them thinking, "Oh my gosh, she gets me." Everyone wants to be understood, right?

I coach employees in a variety of organizations on the art of persuasion. When talking to a sales team about persuasion, I might use the following example to illustrate the importance

of using empathy and trying to understand where the other person is coming from to make a deal. In this example, let's say I'm a travel agent trying to convince a potential client to invest in a post-COVID vacation deal. I know their prefrontal cortex, the logical part of their brain, is thinking, "Why would I invest in this right now, in this pandemic?" But before they even express their reservations in words, I'm looking for the trigger because there is a story behind every emotion. I'm going to use empathy to address the concerns of not only their logical brain, but also the story their emotional brain is telling them, saying something like: "You must be feeling so isolated and so exhausted after all this time stuck at home. I know I am. I feel you, and if I were in your shoes, I'd be the same. This price is not going to be available forever, though, and the tickets are good for a long time." I'm going to have an easier time walking down the path of the sale beside my potential client if I put myself in their shoes, as opposed to being salesy and pushy.

Many people equate reading body language with being able to spot when someone is deceiving you, and it's true that body language experts can use their techniques to pick up on signs that someone may be lying. But I want you to keep this in mind: understanding body language is about much more than becoming a human lie detector. It's about becoming more attuned to the subtle signals coming from those around you, paying more attention to the way your nonverbals affect others, and tapping into a deeper, richer level of our humanity. We can use this information to make your interactions more successful and meaningful, whether in a personal or a professional context.

### **Getting Back in the Game**

Given the surreal world we've been living in for the past year and a half, our ability to read others has been significantly muted. When masks cover our facial expressions and we can only see someone's head on Zoom, how can we respond to the information that comes from their body language and nonverbals? We can't, because we don't *have* that information. This has made it incredibly difficult for all of us to get the full picture and stay connected with those around us.

No matter how the pandemic resolves, we aren't going pop out of our bubbles and be 100 percent whole instantaneously. Our experience as we reemerge will reflect our individual experiences, and some of us will find it more challenging to adjust than others. Regardless, it's likely that the great majority of us have been deeply affected by the experience, even if we don't know it. Whether you call it PTSD, anxiety, social awkwardness, or uncertainty over what is safe and what isn't, it will take some time to fully reconnect. We've been living in survival mode and we may be a little rusty, but eventually we can go from surviving to thriving.

So how do we do it? It may take some time and practice, but the rewards are many. Let's start with the basics. Rather than the ABCs of nonverbal communication, I call my method the "B Before C's." In the following section, I'll explain each of these elements, and then we'll talk about the process of reading others and what to be aware of in managing your own nonverbals. Later on in this book, we'll also talk about how to apply these skills at work, at home, and in your community, and I'll give you some ways to practice what you've learned after being out of touch for way too long, so you'll be ready to get back in the game.

### The B Before C's

Establish a Baseline

Identify Clusters

Be Conscious of Context

Check for Congruency

Take Culture into Account

#### 1. Establish a Baseline

If you don't know what a person's typical expression is when they're relaxed, you won't be able to detect a change that means something is up with them. A baseline is how someone looks, sounds, or acts under normal circumstances, when they're not stressed, and that's the first thing you need to learn to recognize in others. This includes facial expression, tone of voice, and body language.

#### 2. Look for Clusters of Nonverbal Signals

It takes more than one nonverbal cue to make sense of someone's body language. If someone's blinking a lot, don't assume this means they can't look at you because they're lying. They might have something in their eye. But if their baseline is leaning back in their chair and swiveling back and forth, and one day you go into the office and they are leaning forward with their arms on the desk, jiggling a pen, and you can hear their foot tapping and their eyebrows are pulled together, they are out of their baseline.

#### 3. Be Conscious of Context

When you're reading body language, you need to be aware of context—it's crucial to getting it right. Airline employees are trained to keep a lookout for out-of-context behavior. Let's say someone's checking in for a trip to Europe but they don't have any luggage. That's an obvious example of suspicious behavior, but it can be more subtle than that too. If your boss is talking to you much more forcefully than they usually do, and *their* boss is also in the room, they may be

trying to show off their leadership skills; they're not necessarily upset with you. So look around and be aware of context before you react or draw conclusions.

#### 4. Check for Congruency

If words, tone, and nonverbals disagree, there's a disconnect between you and me. Your client might say they are going to think about your proposal, but their pitch is high and sounds strained and their body is pointing toward the door, like they want to get out of there. If you recognize these signs, you have a chance to try to turn a negative situation around, which we'll talk about in the next chapter. For now, I just want you to focus on noticing whether things are matching up.

#### 5. Take Culture into Account

America is a multicultural society, meaning that you have to consider the cultural norms of the person you're communicating with if you want to accurately interpret what they mean. That includes nonverbals like emblems, which are gestures with specific meanings, such as the thumbs-up sign, or figures of speech. These are in a different category than the universal expressions of the seven emotions.

Those are the basics: Baseline, Clusters, Context, Congruency and Culture. Now let's look at how you can start to gain expertise in body language skills.

### **How to Establish a Baseline**

If you want to know a person's baseline, make them feel relaxed by being open and welcoming. Make eye contact in a natural way. Lean forward, mirror their movements in an unforced way, listen, and ask open-ended questions. Questions that require a longer answer mean that the other person will use their hands more, often in rhythm with the body, and you have more of an opportunity to make note of what they do. Consider the following:

- Notice how they hold their head, if they touch their face, make eye contact, or shift their gaze.
- Are they a slow or fast talker? Soft or loud? Is their pitch low or high?
- Do they use a lot of verbal fillers: "like," "uh," "you know," or "sort of?"
- Do they seem to take up a lot of space in the room, or shrink down into their chair?

Once you feel you have a handle on someone's natural cadence, tone, expression, and movements, you are aware of their baseline. When it changes, you'll know that something

might be going on physically, emotionally, or psychologically. But what do you do with that information? How do you know what those changes might be telling you? And how do you use the information you've gathered to facilitate connection? This is the art of interpreting nonverbal cues. There is far more to nonverbal communication, but let's start with the basics.

### **How to Read Basic Body Language**

Some of understanding body language is second nature—we instinctively respond to an angry gesture, a pleasant smile, or open arms welcoming us into a hug. When you can pick up and translate subtle cues, however, and know which are reliable and which may be flukes, then you're really in business. Being able to detect that a big client is anxious and unable to focus on your presentation may mean that you decide to postpone the meeting. Picking up on the nonverbal signals that mean your partner is relaxed may mean it's a good time to bring up that sensitive topic that could otherwise lead to an argument.

With some practice, you can use your growing awareness of body language to increase your attunement to others, which lets you respond appropriately and with empathy. Here are the five areas of the body to start observing closely:

#### *The Face*

Practice recognizing the seven universal emotions: happiness, sadness, surprise, disgust, contempt, and anger. There are many other emotions, of course, and people can feel more than one emotion at a time, but you can rely on these seven, no matter the background of the person you're reading.

#### *The Arms*

If someone crosses their arms, or holds them in a way that looks restricted, they could be hiding something or communicating that they feel defensive or don't want to be noticed. Alternatively, spreading the arms wide can be a friendly gesture, but it can also be an unconscious attempt to appear larger or more commanding, which animals often do in the natural world.

#### *The Hands*

Our hands hold a wealth of information about what we are really thinking and feeling, so learn to clock what people are doing with them. There are about four hundred hand gestures that people use, and hand gestures often show authenticity or reveal a lack thereof. If someone exposes their palms, it can be a plea gesture, meaning they are asking you for something, like the woman who wanted to buy my school candy. A power steeple, when people put their fingertips together, demonstrates confidence and power. If someone is fidgeting with their

hands, they may feel ill at ease, or they may be experiencing an excess of energy and need an outlet for it. Cupped hands may be holding an idea that is delicate in the mind of the person, and clenched fists can be a sign of possessiveness or intense desire as well as anger.<sup>2</sup> People who are depressed don't use or raise their hands as much as those who are engaged tend to do. Police are often trained to check the position of people's hands, because when we are being truthful, we expose our palms outward when we communicate.

### *The Legs*

When reading body language, always check the position of a person's legs. Are they crossed at the knees? This is a common closed body position, reflecting a desire for privacy and a reluctance to let too much information out. Splayed legs are more open or dominant, as is the figure four, where the ankle rests just above the knee of the other leg. If legs are crossed at the ankles, the "ankle lock" can indicate someone is holding back or feeling fearful. People will often point their feet in the direction they want to go, so if someone's shoes are pointed towards the door, that's a clue they may want to exit the situation. "Thigh cleansing," when someone repeatedly rubs their hands down their legs, is a pacifying gesture that indicates someone may well be feeling nervous.

### *Body Angle*

The "belly button rule" can be one of the most important indicators of someone's true intentions, according to Mehrabian. If you are navel to navel with someone and they are fully turned toward you with an open posture, they are more likely to be communicating honestly and openly. If they turn their body away from you, they could be signaling disagreement or dismissal, no matter what they're saying with their words.

These are some of the very basics of the extensive work that has gone into understanding nonverbal communication, and a few of the touchstones that I use in my own work. I'll give you an informal way to start building your body language expertise.

In sum, establishing a baseline and taking note of the basic five categories of body language should be your go-to's as you spend more physical time with others after the long hiatus. Always bear in mind that no one element or action means that much on its own. Body language is about the totality of what you see.

The flip side of body language fluency is that you can learn to be more aware of what you're putting out there. A change in posture or tone can make all the difference in how effectively you communicate. Understanding how you come across, depending on elements like your stance or pitch, is the essence of utilizing the power of nonverbal language when you are

transmitting rather than receiving.

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In the next chapter, we'll talk about how you can apply some of these techniques to the post-pandemic working world. If you have already returned to work, is it strange being back in the office after all this time? Do you feel awkward around your colleagues even if you're glad to see them? How about your supervisor? Are you stressed about your interactions with them, or do you find yourself feeling avoidant? Are you resentful about being called back or having a hard time adapting? If you are still working remotely, would you prefer to put off in-person interaction indefinitely? Do you ever feel guilty about that?

According to an April 2021 poll conducted by the Best Practices Institute, 90 percent of workers said they would prefer to continue to work remotely. However, since many employers want their employees back in the office at some point, citing reasons like teamwork and collaboration, we all need to think about and prepare for the reality of going back.

In Chapter Two, I'll address how your new understanding of nonverbal communication can help you reconnect more smoothly at work and help you attain your professional goals.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Workplace Reconnection: Remote, IRL, or Something in Between?*

Your work life, no matter what you do for a living, was very likely disrupted by the pandemic. Over the past months, many of us have contemplated some serious decisions about what we want to be doing in our careers, who we want to be doing it with, and where we want to be during our working hours. If we are employees, we may be wondering about balancing personal and professional priorities or have anxiety about rejoining our work community; if we are in leadership roles, we may have those same worries and also be concerned about employee retention, motivation, and performance.

If you are a member of Gen Z just entering the workforce, you may have missed out on building some important skills. I donate time to help college students prep for job interviews and I have noticed that many of them have weak interviewing skills—this was true even pre-COVID. Being adept at social media is not the same as acing face-to-face interaction, and many young people have never mastered how to handle an interview, tending to fidget and avoid making eye contact. A year of relative isolation didn't help, so now younger people may have to work extra hard to develop effective ways of connecting. You have all of four to seven seconds to make a first impression, so it's important to feel confident and comfortable going into an interview.

I choose to look at the work situation this way: After a year of high tech instead of high touch, you have a unique chance to grab this moment to step forward and step up in your career. If you're vaccinated, it's time to restart your engine. If you felt stuck, if you felt lost, if you felt you were on the cusp of an opportunity that evaporated, you can not only get back on track but you can move forward.

#### **The TAP Principle**

I teach people in a variety of fields how to get where they want to go professionally. A key part of achieving your goals at work, and succeeding in personal situations too, is being able to recognize when someone is being honest and authentic with you. It's also important to be able to communicate authentically yourself. When I teach professional groups about body language, I refer to a principle I have developed called "TAP." When someone is being *Truthful* and *Authentic*—the *Proof* will be in their body language and nonverbals. That's the TAP Principle.

When someone is being deceptive, they can rehearse the words, and maybe even their tone of voice, but they overlook the gestures and movement that come with truth-telling (outlined in the previous chapter). As a result, their body language may seem stilted or out of sync with what they are saying. When someone is being truthful and authentic, on the other



hand, the proof is in the unity of their words, tonality, and body language. One other insight into deceit: someone who is not being truthful can usually only tell a story forward—they need to create the plot beat by beat and cannot jump around or go backwards.

TAP is a guiding principle that can help us identify authenticity in others and vet our own communication as we shift gears and head into an unprecedented phase of our work lives. TAP can also come very naturally, if we allow ourselves to be our true selves and embrace the principle. It takes a lot of work to try to be someone you're not and it's an effort to sustain. When you're being your authentic self, you'll feel more confident and relaxed, and communication will begin to flow naturally. Instead of expending energy and focus on projecting a version of yourself that isn't really you, you can focus on being more aware of the other person and their signals. And of course, this doesn't mean saying whatever comes to mind or acting however you'd like—the rules of society still apply.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Body Language**

Chances are, you have heard of a concept known as emotional intelligence, or EQ, and you may be wondering how it fits in with understanding body language and nonverbals. In a nutshell, when you learn to decode body language, you boost your EQ. Emotional intelligence as a concept was popularized in the nineties, and today it is widely used to describe and measure a person's ability to observe, utilize, understand, and manage emotions. It is generally believed that people with high EQ are more adept at managing social interactions and maintaining relationships, have better mental health, show stronger leadership skills, and perform better in their jobs than those with lower EQ. Emotional intelligence is a powerful tool to have in the working world and the good news is that even if you don't naturally have high EQ, it's a trait that you can actively cultivate.

When I was in high school, I used to watch hours of TV with the sound off, soaking in the body language of the characters in the various TV shows I watched. I was training myself to pick up on what was going on between people based solely on their nonverbals. This was my way of developing my EQ, which eventually paid off for me in my sales career, and ultimately led to my work as a body language expert today. Watching TV with the sound off is just one fun and easy way to improve your ability to read people. I will give you some additional techniques for boosting your EQ in the next few paragraphs.

Much has been written about emotional intelligence, but the four generally recognized areas of EQ are:

- **Self-awareness:** the ability to identify your emotions

- **Self-regulation:** the ability to manage your emotions
- **Social awareness:** the ability to understand the emotions of others (our old friend empathy)
- **Social skills:** the ability to inspire, resolve conflict, influence others, and be collaborative

If you're not sure where you sit on the EQ scale, ask yourself a few questions. Do you often feel misunderstood? Are you easily upset and overwhelmed? Do you have difficulty asserting yourself? If you don't struggle with any of these issues, you probably have high EQ—congratulations! (Though this does not mean that you can forget about the importance of developing those body language reading skills). If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may have low EQ, or EQ that is in the mid-range, and you are far from alone. Many of us struggle with these issues, and the good news is that there are things you can do to raise your emotional intelligence level. I recommend the following techniques:

- **Listen and observe actively.** Track your own and others' nonverbals in situations where you want to connect and respond accordingly. If someone is signaling that they are anxious, consider backing off. Similarly, if you know that you are feeling anxious, give yourself a break and consider trying again in a moment when you are feeling more together. If someone is signaling that they are confident and open, or if you are feeling this way, seize the moment for connection.
- **Check in with your emotions.** Become more aware of your own emotional state by periodically making a conscious effort to ask yourself how you are feeling. The more in tune you are with yourself, the easier it will be to read and recognize emotions in others.
- **Be present.** When entering an important meeting or conversation with someone, whether professional or personal, do your best to check whatever internal baggage you might be carrying around with you at the door so that you can be more conscious and present. This way, nothing gets in the way of your powers of observation. When I read people, I make an effort to be 100 percent present. When I give all my attention, I pick up more intel.

Building your emotional intelligence has a multitude of benefits, including better relationships and improved mental health and happiness. Too many of us are busy broadcasting, but not tuning in. When we pay more attention to those around us, we stand to gain a lot, so it's worth becoming more proficient at reading nonverbals to raise your emotional intelligence. It takes practice and patience.

Now let's look at getting back to work.

### **Post-COVID Tips for Employees and Workers**

If you are one of the millions of people who discovered that working remotely has its benefits, I hope you can continue to reap the rewards of no commute, more family time, and additional flexibility if you choose. Remote work is great for some people, but for others it has negative effects on mood, energy, confidence levels, and even trust in our colleagues. Take some time for self-reflection and figure out where you fit on the remote work spectrum and how you want to proceed.

#### *For Those Who Continue to Work Remotely*

If you want to keep working at home and your employer is okay with it, you will have to work harder at making your presence known if you want to move up, especially if your coworkers are starting to go back to the office. Remember that “remote” equals distance between you and your employer, which can make it harder for you to connect in a way that is going to get you noticed. It's more challenging to build a rapport with your boss and vibe with colleagues on Zoom because you're missing so much nonverbal information. People on Zoom don't respond and interact spontaneously like they do in person. It's harder to pick up cues as to when someone is finished speaking, for instance, and you usually can't see much of their body language.

You can compensate for some of it, however. Learn how to Zoom like a superstar with the following tips:

- Make sure your background is calm and uncluttered and your framing and lighting are on the mark. Use a blue room if you have one, or a blue Zoom background—it's a calming color, which is a good choice.
- Watch your posture. Sit up straight and raise your head.
- Make sure you look professional, even if you're working from home: no messy hair, stained T-shirts, or unshaven faces.
- Tone is super important, so make sure yours is conversational, pleasant, and professional.
- Keep your energy up, lean in, and stay on time and on task, just like you would if you were sitting in a room with your boss, working together.
- Smile though your heart is aching. If something is bothering you, keep it to yourself in the Zoom work environment.
- Lastly, acknowledgment the elephant in the room: We're here, even if we're not “here.”

Though we are interacting in a virtual rather than a physical work environment, we're going to do our best to communicate fully, to be truly productive, and to engage.

A Zoom screen is no substitute for physical presence, it must be said. But if this is the reality of your work world right now, remember to be 100 percent present when you Zoom. Be the first to comment, compliment, and lean in to the discussion.

### *For Those Who Are Returning to the Office*

If you choose or are required to return to your office, you can benefit from giving some thought to your approach before you go back. People's lives, including your own, may have changed in ways no one anticipated, and you will need to be sensitive to that. How do we prepare for the impact of being thrust back into the physical work world?

If you were happy in your job pre-COVID, use positive imagery to help you fall back in love with your work. Relive fun or successful work scenarios prior to the pandemic: "Oh man, we used to have these fabulous muffins in the break room every Friday." "I felt so proud in that department meeting when my boss told the SVP I did a great job on the presentation." Recalling the feelings of good times will help you go back to the office in the right frame of mind. It's not just your imagination, either—those positive images can stimulate the production of feel-good chemicals in the body like dopamine and serotonin, which help build excitement and anticipation.

If your employer requires you to go back to the office and you feel anxious or unsettled, try these tips:

- If your company allows it, go by the office a day or two before it reopens. Refamiliarize yourself with the place and try a few positive imagery exercises.
- Reclaim your space: Bring in pictures, a plant, or a little something that is a piece of home.
- Reach out to a favorite coworker before you go back. Set up some time to get reacquainted in a comfortable place like a favorite coffee shop or in the park across from the office.
- Consider how you'll operate in your personal space in the office, because some social distancing may still be in effect. Will you keep a mask on your desk? Will you have a sign that says: "Mask? Just ask (and I'll put one on)"?

### *Once You're Back*

Connect face-to-face with colleagues whenever possible, while adhering to any social distancing

rules your employer has put in place. Don't send an email if you're two cubicles down from someone. Make an effort to approach your colleagues whenever it's safe to do so. Become more aware of body language signals that act as "barriers" or "blocking behavior." Creating barriers is often unconscious. Imagine that you are walking down the hall carrying a folder, and you see a colleague coming toward you whom you haven't seen in months. For whatever reason you are less than eager to interact with this person again. As they approach to say hello, you might automatically take your folder and hold it up to your chest because you're a little unsure about the interaction. You've just created a barrier.

We created barriers pre-pandemic too, of course, whenever we wanted to distance ourselves from others to conceal something or protect ourselves. Perhaps a coworker did something to offend you prior to the pandemic, and now seems to have forgotten about it. When you see them again, you may say hello, but your arms are folded. That's blocking, and you need to be aware of it because a key to going back to the office successfully is staying open and moving past old grievances (assuming they are excusable).

We can be open and still maintain social distance if we need to by checking in on our own body language. Say I'm looking at you and my eyes are wide open. That says I'm excited see you. Or maybe you are standing in the door to my office and beaming at me. The light from that smile can be so bright that I feel the warmth of your energy. This is the kind of body language that will get everyone thinking, "I'm so glad to be back." And that's worth aiming for.

### **Post COVID Tips for Employers and Managers**

A significant number of people either quit their jobs during the pandemic or were laid off or furloughed and decided not to come back. If you're an employer, the aftermath may have left you with some major holes to fill. How can you use body language and nonverbals to express support for your employees who are coming back, especially if they seem hesitant about reentry?

When it comes to leadership, actions speak louder than words. You should aspire to inspire. When I coach leaders preparing for a TED Talk, for instance, we talk about "power poses" that will help them convey authority and expertise. But what if you are a leader who feels less than confident yourself about coming back? Even if you feel ill at ease, you can fake it till you make it, projecting the confidence that you want to want to feel yourself and to inspire in your employees, keeping these body language tips in mind:

- **Move with Purpose.** Less is more, because too much movement can hint at nerves or anxiety.
- **Posture Counts.** Stand with your shoulders and head held high and the trunk of your

body open.

- **Tame and Train Your Tone.** Keep it in your lower register, which will lend you more authority.
- **Balance Power and Warmth.** Research shows that a good equilibrium between projecting authority and showing empathy is essential. Too many power moves will make you appear aloof and disconnected.

Pay attention to how your employees may be feeling as they return to work, and do your best to lead while meeting them where they are. Recognize that millennials, who tend to be particularly community-oriented, may have been especially hard hit by the disconnection of remote work, missing face-to-face relationships with colleagues and friends, and feeling a lack of support and direction from mentors and bosses. Be sensitive to the fact that employees with children have struggled with issues like lack of childcare, having to supervise their kids on Zoom school, and the risk of COVID outbreaks in their kids' schools now that school is back in session. Other employees may have struggled with issues like burnout, the difficulty of work-life balance, and technology overload. Be aware of all of these potential issues and allow your nonverbals to reflect this attunement in the following ways.

### *Appreciate, Observe, Respond*

Effective leaders know how to demonstrate the art of appreciation and show that they recognize the value in their teams. If your employees are coming back into the office, show them they were missed not just through your words, but through your actions. If the budget allows, consider the gesture of a welcome-back gift. Imagine the reaction to that!

Awareness is another key for leaders and emerging leaders. Use your powers of observation to see what's going on around you. Watch the people in the office as they head toward a group meeting once everyone is back. Are they moving fast, excited to be there, practically running to the conference room? Or are they doing a slow death march to the meeting? If it's the second of those two, you know you have some work to do.

Get personal and maintain a connection to your team. If there's a board meeting, for instance, you can ask people to sit down right as they come in, which is likely to put a table between you and them. Or you can choose to stand near the door and take a few minutes to build rapport, talking face to face with each person as they come in, so they can easily see your body language. Those of us who are open may even position ourselves so that our posture displays our most vulnerable areas—throat, chest, and belly—all covered by our professional attire, of course! This is a link back to our primal selves—in the wild, many animals will do the same.

### *Coordinating Personal Space and Support*

Everyone in the workplace, employee or supervisor, should remember that some people may still want or need social distance. This means leaders should set guidelines so that office workers are not left navigating these interactions themselves. People are getting creative with how to communicate new procedures. For example, some companies are offering colored wrist bands: red if you're social distancing at all times, yellow if you prefer a mask, and green if you feel good to go and it's safe for you to be around others.

While many of us may be thrilled to get back to work in person, others may stress. Consider what mental health services your company might be able to offer. This is our new normal for now, and your employees will appreciate it when they sense that you care about their well-being. Even though most of us have removed our masks, we may still be wearing them metaphorically. In Latin, the word mask means *persona*, an identity we put on. The cloth masks may be gone, but we may still be hiding our true feelings, so stay observant and look for those who need reassurance or a sympathetic ear.

For many of us, the workplace used to be a second home of sorts, and it may take us a while to find that comfortable place again. For others, remote work will become a permanent way of life, and we'll benefit by learning how to adjust our nonverbals so that we maintain a connection with our coworkers and supervisors.

Don't worry about being perfect, no matter where you are. Just be conscious of the above and be authentic. When you speak, think about opening up your core, which will open you to others, and move with purpose. It can have a tremendous positive impact.

In the next chapter, we'll look at what adjustments we can make to home life in the wake of COVID. Some of us may have become closer with our families and enjoyed the bonding time; others may be chomping at the bit for time away. The principles of body language and nonverbal communication are just as important in our most personal relationships as in our work life, and we'll explore how we can become better, not bitter, about life under COVID.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Love in the Time of COVID: Tending to Our Personal Relationships*

COVID left few areas of our lives untouched, though our emotional and psychological responses to the pandemic are as individual as we are. I've seen people who found solace in the alone time and used it for self-reflection and reinvention, and I heard stories from my brother, who is a psychotherapist and teaches workshops on domestic violence, about the dramatic rise in destructive behaviors. The toll on mental health has been heavy for some of us, while others managed relatively well. It will be a while before we have a true measure of the pandemic's legacy and impact on our mental health, but our nonverbal communication says a lot about how we did and how we can move forward.

My observation is that living through the pandemic magnified many of our existing traits and tendencies. If your personal barometer was sunny and breezy before COVID, you may have been able to develop effective coping strategies. If you tend to be dark and moody, the quarantine may have made your depression and loneliness worse.

It was tough enough on adults, but what about impact on our kids? If you are a parent, you've probably been stressing about this, so let's start there.

#### **The Kids Are All Right—Or Are They?**

Your children have been fixated on your body language from infancy, when they mirrored your smile and studied every millimeter of your face. As they grow, they continue to model their nonverbals on yours. If you are a physically affectionate person, your children are likely to be the same when they grow up, even if they push you away as tweens and teens. Not a hugger? Your kids probably won't be either.

We also use body language to help teach children the rules of society. We smile at others, we stop at the corner when the sign says "Don't Walk," we pet a friend's dog. Young children may not understand the nuances of what you're doing, but if your nonverbals reinforce your words (remember TAP), they will trust what you say: "When you see the red light, don't cross the street." "You can pet a puppy, but only when a grownup tells you it's okay." But what about when the world is turned upside down? Who do they trust then?

You may have observed pandemic-related behaviors in your own children similar to those that psychologists have been documenting. About a third of parents of children ages five through twelve, surveyed by the Kaiser Family Foundation, felt their kids had suffered some emotional or mental distress through the pandemic. This may have shown up nonverbally as clinginess, distraction, irritability, and fearfulness. Among older kids, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation survey, about a quarter of high schoolers reported emotional distress.



Children are also vulnerable to *your* pandemic-related angst, whether you are stressing about childcare, job insecurity, loss of income, isolation, or fear of COVID.

As your children head back to school, a percentage of them still unvaccinated, they may develop separation anxiety after spending so much time with the family or be fearful for their health and safety. In some cases, kids who have been bullied, who experience social anxiety, or who have learning disabilities may not want to go back to school because quarantine was easier for them. The upheaval of COVID can have long-term consequences for children, but you can help them navigate these uncharted waters with the strategies that follow.

### *Signal That You Are There for Your Kids*

Even if your kid doesn't articulate their emotions, you know how they're feeling. Children express themselves with crystal clarity through body language. Don't ignore the signs. Instead, make the time. Let your kids know that you see when they are worried or anxious—put it out there and they will feel less alone.

No matter how busy you are, if your kid is trying to get your attention, take the time to turn to them with an open posture, make eye contact, and listen. Negative body language from you, such as not looking at them when they speak to you or ignoring their questions, won't help the situation. Positive body language gives them what they need—you—and helps them build confidence and self-esteem, which may have taken a hit by the long time-out of quarantine. Here are some tips you probably already know as a parent, but it's always good to reinforce these nonverbals.

- Step up the hugs and reassurance.
- Make more one-on-one time for each child.
- Touch with your tone—a gentle voice is another way to hug.
- Speak slowly and thoughtfully.
- Get on their level. Bend, stoop or sit so you are eye to eye.
- Share activities. Cook, do homework, play games.

If you truly are in the middle of something that can't be interrupted, explain calmly that you need a few minutes to finish what you are doing, but that you'll be with them as soon as you can break away. Then make good on that promise.

### *Use Your Emotional Intelligence to Help Your Kids*

Anxiety feeds anxiety, so work on self-regulating and remain calm and upbeat around your children as much as possible. Tune in and stop broadcasting—don't make it about you. Use your

EQ to take stock of your child's emotional needs and give them the empathy and attention they deserve.

You can use some of the same techniques to create a positive atmosphere at home that leaders in the workplace use. If your kid seems nervous about school, ask or prompt them about cool things they remember and can look forward to enjoying again, like the soccer team or working on the yearbook. Younger children might be reassured if you give them a small piece of home to take with them—a little something they can put in their pocket to touch so they can feel connected to you. If they seem afraid of getting sick when they go back to school, explain that schools are taking safety measures to reduce the risk, so they'll know adults are in charge.

### **Partners, Spouses, and Significant Others**

Before the pandemic, both marriage and divorce rates had declined in the past ten years. We don't know the full impact of COVID on this pattern yet, but there are signs that people who had good coping skills before the pandemic tended to grow more satisfied with their partners and cut them plenty of slack when it came to finding fault or pointing the finger about household responsibilities. Sharing the surreal experience of the pandemic may have led to more tolerance, understanding and forgiveness between some couples. People who had relationship struggles before COVID tended to become more dissatisfied with their partner and blamed them more often for perceived transgressions. Take some alone time to reflect on how you and your partner handled the pandemic to build self-awareness and awareness of your loved one's state of mind. If there's room for improvement, you can try some nonverbal communication:

- Give each other a massage.
- Dance together. Why not?
- Cook together.
- Schedule time once a week to reconnect: This could be as little as fifteen to twenty minutes, free from outside distractions, to sit down and catch up.
- Show you're listening by leaning in and making eye contact, and then really listen. Let your head and body move naturally—you'll nod at the right spot and shift closer when your partner is open to it.

As we reconnect with relatives and extended families, we'll have to use our EQ to navigate here too. The pandemic has made us appreciate friends and family more, but we have to get used to some new variables. Do I hug you if I'm vaccinated and you are not? Do I share my feelings about masks, variants, and all the rest of it? We have all formed biases and judgements during this time that could lead to family conflict.

It might be helpful to share something you've discovered about COVID and ask for input. Not "here's what we should do" but "look at what I read and maybe we should all research it and then talk about it." Offering information without soliciting input might be seen as a weapon: "I'm going to attack you with my facts," but making it an interaction might ease tensions. Make it a point to continue remote rituals that formed during quarantine. Did you share recipes? Send photos of the week? Keep it going. You're making a new family tradition, with all the richness that adds to life.

### **The New Dating Game**

What if you are single and interested in resuming dating life when you feel safe to do so? According to a Match Group survey, activity on dating apps stayed strong during lockdown because it was a way to connect and communicate, even if in-person socializing was mostly off limits. Quarantine also gave some singles the opportunity to think back on dating patterns and behaviors and consider how they could improve them.<sup>3</sup> Some people said they became more aware of what they are looking for in a partner, or whether they even wanted one. Use of dating apps is surging now, but the prospect of meeting a potential romantic partner in person may feel awkward psychologically and physically.

Planning ahead can help you find your comfort level when it comes to getting back into the swing of dating. Think about what you are comfortable with going into that first date and establish boundaries in your mind that you plan to communicate. You may want to text with your date ahead of time to ask them what they are comfortable with. Indoor versus outdoor dining? Vaccinated or not? How about mask protocols? Once you meet, don't be afraid to ask the other person how they are feeling about it all—put the awkwardness out there! It can do a lot to help erase invisible barriers. Touch only with permission, but your body language and tone can say a lot.

- Watch how fast and loud you speak—don't barrel ahead or speak in a whisper. Your tone will let someone know if you are welcoming getting to know them.
- If you're masked, let your eyes do some talking. Keep it authentic, but don't look down or around too much of the time.
- Lean and beam, which means smile internally and externally while keeping your body position open. If you're truly listening, your body will reflect it by facing your date with relaxed arms and legs. You won't have to think about this if you're tapping into TAP.

Some things about dating don't change, and among them are the Three A's that signal interest and attraction, if that's what you're feeling.

- Attention: Give your partner your full, undivided attention for the time you're together. Who wants to be on a date with someone who is checking their phone or checking out the other possibilities?
- Admiration: When you like someone, let them know! Though you can be subtle about it with nonverbals. Communicate that you value and admire the person you're with through open, relaxed body language.
- Acceptance: We all look for it. Put your partner at ease and make them feel good with nonverbal signals that show you're on the same page—nod as they are speaking, laugh at their jokes (assuming you find them funny!). A smile and a gentle touch goes a long way too.

Communicating these things nonverbally doesn't mean you don't expect respect and equality, or that you can't express yourself honestly. But keep them in mind, because when you are getting to know someone, nonverbals can ease the process. Who wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of the Three A's? Dating may feel alien initially, but biology is a powerful thing, and with some pre-planning and keeping a few basic principles about how you're communicating in mind, you should begin to get comfortable with the search for a true romantic connection.

COVID was a stress test of our most intimate bonds—those between parents and children, romantic partners, and even friends. Some understandably struggled to adjust, while others found new insights and ways to accommodate the needs of those closest to them. At some point in the future, perhaps we can look back and recognize that what did not break us made our personal relationships stronger.

In the next chapter, we'll look at society as a whole, including how different groups have experienced the pandemic, and how we can begin to participate in our communities again in a way that can help us learn to live together in healthier communities.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Power of Community: Rebuilding Healthy Connections on a Civic Level*

It is undeniable that COVID has been a global experience. Regardless of where you are on the planet, COVID has affected you. At the same time, the virus's impact varies depending on your smaller community or subgroup, with factors like geographic region, socioeconomic status, racial group, preexisting health conditions, and age playing a major role in how you have been affected.

In terms of psychological effects, young adults between eighteen and twenty-four seem to have been affected more significantly than any other age group by the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> In general, they expressed more anxiety and loneliness than other groups. When you are young, you have a lifetime of possibility stretching out in front of you and you are excited to grab it, but COVID prevented many young adults from taking steps to reach their most significant goals. College, jobs, homes of their own—signifiers of accomplishments in life—were put on hold.

Birthdays, graduations, and other life events that should be joyful and memorable moments also passed by in abnormal ways, adding to the feeling of missing important milestones. All the technological connectivity in the world could not replace personal connection. Opportunities for relationship-building with colleagues and new friends were lost, and there were far fewer of the kinds of interactions that help us develop the power of emotional intelligence. Their nonverbals were often signals sent out to no one, lost in space.

In general, older people adjusted better to the constraints of the pandemic, according to a study of people aged eighteen to seventy-six by the Association for Psychological Science. They have often pared down the number of friendships they maintain, and they generally do less socializing than younger people, so pandemic living may have been less of a lifestyle adjustment.

Looking out on a shorter timeline ahead, and with the wisdom of experience behind them, older adults are often more grounded and more able to live in the moment knowing that they have already lived good, long lives. That doesn't mean they sailed through COVID, however. We have all weathered heavy storms throughout the pandemic, with many older adults struggling with social isolation, inability to see family, and their increased vulnerability to the virus.

Regardless of age or demographic, we all sustained losses of communication that were sometimes subtle, but still caused damage. Community is not always about structured group endeavors like a church event or a block party. The small exchanges of daily life—saying hello to the barista or the dry cleaner, waving to the neighbor across the hall, exchanging a smile with a stranger—that's also community. When those fleeting interactions largely disappeared, we not only felt more isolated but also became more divided ideologically and socioeconomically, as

well as more fearful of one another. In a time of crisis, instead of pulling together, in American society in particular, we broke apart. Our defenses were up, we blamed each other, and many of us were unable to connect physically or emotionally.

### *Biases and Body Language*

The pandemic led to a surge in incidents of racism and overt bias. Not only were COVID cases and deaths disproportionately higher in communities with larger Black populations (and likely Hispanic communities as well, though the data is unclear), but according to the Pew Research Center, “about four in ten Black and Asian adults say people have acted as if they were uncomfortable around them because of their race or ethnicity since the beginning of the outbreak, and similar [numbers] say they worry that other people might be suspicious of them if they wear a mask when out in public.” The signals those groups were picking up from others were largely nonverbals: the sneer, the pursed lips, the turning away. On social media, we saw disturbing videos of people ripping masks off shelves and shrieking accusations at innocent shoppers who happened to be of a different culture or race, frustrated and unable to express themselves in healthier and more acceptable ways. Emblems like the OK sign, which has been co-opted as a symbol of white supremacy, appeared in lieu of debate. Flags, arms, and military-looking apparel were a kind of cosplay that signaled points of view. The mask became the ultimate symbol of lost communication.

There was a tragic aspect to the breakdown of the interactions of daily life, because they can help break down biases over time. When we experience things together and our nonverbals are in full swing, it can reinforce our shared humanity. And that went missing.

Adding to the fear and confusion, some of our local and national leaders modeled verbal and nonverbal behavior that sowed distrust and blame, making people feel justified in looking out only for themselves. In body language terms, a large number of us responded by mirroring the poses that we observed in our leaders. Our trust in authority was pummeled from many sides, slowing and even halting the efforts of public health officials who were trying to do what was in the public interest. It was the opposite of community at a time when we needed it most.

There have been counterbalances and bright spots, of course. The many stories of heroic actions by frontline healthcare workers, people stepping up to defend those under verbal and physical racist attacks, massive protests asking for an end to police brutality against Black Americans, along with the countless small kindnesses, show that we are still capable of empathy and compassion.

We are far from out of the woods when it comes to COVID, but we are learning to adapt to the new realities of our world, and there is plenty of light coming through the trees. It is time to relearn how to approach one another with civility and tolerance. We must become more

self-aware and work on managing our emotions as well as being aware of others' emotions, conjuring up our old friend empathy. Rather than trying to move on without processing what we have been through together, we need to bear in mind the rewards of remembering and the consequences of forgetting.

If you have removed your mask and are going out more often these days, make an extra effort to be kind and courteous and have patience while the bumps in the road are being smoothed out. The reports of restaurant patrons becoming irate at servers and hosts are legion, not to mention the behavior on airplanes. Restaurant workers are dealing with being short-staffed and cooks are dealing with cooking without ingredients that would normally have been delivered. Airline staff took big risks to keep people flying during the pandemic. Instead of getting frustrated and angry, be grateful that we have come this far and communicate your understanding of how difficult it must still be for businesses at this time.

Decide what kind of contribution you can make. Will your contribution be a positive one that helps rebuild tolerance? Or will you allow frustration to take over and communicate the negativity that comes with it? When you say something hurtful to someone, it can become "anchored," meaning that if the first experience someone has of you is negative, it becomes a cognitive bias that sticks. You can apologize, but it can be very hard to get a second chance. Instead, work on self-management. Whether you take small or large steps as you venture back out into the world, consider whether they are helpful in rebuilding a sense of community.

In the next section, I will offer some final thoughts, along with a 30-Day Challenge for Reconnection, a quick guide to using body language and nonverbals to kick start your post-pandemic life.

## CONCLUSION

### *The Challenge: 30 Days to Reconnection*

We've looked at the basics of body language and how the outbreak interrupted so much of this vital part of our communication at work, at home, and in our communities. At this point, it feels safe to begin making investments in a future where we won't be wearing masks constantly or on Zoom 24/7. But don't let old habits keep drawing on your emotional bank account balance. You don't want to bankrupt yourself; you want to replenish the emotional currency that sustains your mind and heart.

One way to do that is to think back on how you were as a child—curious and open. Reconnect with that childlike part of yourself (it didn't disappear; it was cemented into your neurons and then overlaid with years of other experiences) and give yourself the opportunity to respond to and experience much more of life. Rediscovering your curiosity, even in a world that seems harsh and fractured at the moment, is taking an important first step. Remember when I competed for the prize for selling candy as a kid? I didn't know enough to be worried or afraid; I just went for it, and I won.

Your EQ development will also replenish you. Part of becoming more self-aware includes discovering and understanding your emotional triggers—intense feelings linked to bad memories or events. They may make you feel rejected, angry, ignored, or the target of unfair criticism. Emotional triggers have negative consequences because they can cause you to disconnect, judge, or shut down. When you know what yours are, you can learn how to handle them, and you'll also get better at recognizing and defusing them in other people.

To unearth your emotional triggers, notice when strong physical sensations come up during a conversation or event. That's your amygdala going into overdrive—pounding heart, sweaty palms, queasiness. Use your curiosity to examine what the connection is between those physical feelings and your past experiences. Let's say you're just back at work and your coworker Jordan stops by your desk and says, "You were the first one out of the building when we had to lock down. I didn't expect to see you back here." You feel angry and dissed by his comment. Is he calling you out for being afraid? Maybe. Or maybe he was saying that you were smart to take the action you did, but because you had an incident years ago, where you felt you deserted a friend who was in need, you're supersensitive about abandoning people and may have misinterpreted his remarks.

Even if Jordan's remark *was* a coded insult, what's the best way for you to process and respond to that information? Acknowledge your emotional response, and step away for a moment if you need to. Remind yourself of your strengths. You can respond to your coworker, but do so in a self-regulated way: "Well, that doesn't make me feel so great. I think it was a



good decision on my part.” You don’t blame Jordan, but you do communicate your reaction, which could help calm you down. Ultimately, it’s better to identify and deal with emotional triggers rather than letting them fester or responding with instinctive flight or fight reactions, behaviors that are unlikely to get you where you want to go. Become more self-aware and reap the rewards of understanding yourself, which is the first step to understanding others.

### *Mastering Nonverbal Cues*

As you re-emerge, consider the nature of your own nonverbals, including posture, gestures, and tone. The simple act of thinking about them will start to allow you to use them with purpose. Do you want to be more persuasive? Do you want to be more charismatic? Now that you know that open power zones—positioning your body so that you are open to others—can draw people in, and active listening can make you a person others want to be around, what will you do with that information? Let’s use it!

Never forget the power of empathy—it’s one of the most important tools in both your work and personal life. Instead of judging, stay open and say to yourself, “I’m going to listen and learn. I’ll be a student and lean in.” Physically anchoring yourself will open you up as well, which means using the habit of making a gesture or touching something that you associate with positive feelings. Make a habit of putting your pen or phone down when someone speaks to you, and don’t avoid eye contact. See how it affects the interaction. I guarantee you it will be positive. These tools can help us get past the awkwardness that’s a byproduct of all the social isolation. Simply making more of an effort will pay off.

### *30 Days to Reconnection*

To jump-start your progress, I have a challenge for you. I want you to commit to engaging in some activities over the next thirty days at work, at home, and in your community (following the latest safety guidelines, of course) that are designed to spark connection. Perhaps you used to do these sorts of things regularly. It’s time to start again. If you weren’t exactly a connection butterfly pre-COVID, make an agreement with yourself to give it a try. I’d like to hear how it goes, so feel free to share your Reconnection Challenge experiences on my website: [www.lindaclemons.com](http://www.lindaclemons.com).

For the next thirty days, choose an activity that you are going to commit to from each of the three following categories:

- **At work:** Volunteer to organize a team-building activity, like a workplace book club, virtual zoom drinks, or a trivia night with your colleagues.

- **At home:** Organize an outdoor gathering for friends and family. Send out an invite and as each person arrives, give them a little decorated card that notes something special about them. I promise that you will see people open right up with this activity and it will become a night of a million smiles.
- **In your community:** Volunteer to deliver meals to people in need, or clean up a local park. Do what fits your comfort level when it comes to getting out there and giving of yourself. But commit to finding that fit.

When the thirty days are up, look back at what you've accomplished. I guarantee that even if you pushed yourself beyond your comfort zone, you will feel good about it, and you will have made others feel good too.

### *Why It's Worth It*

The pandemic has left us with a residue of social awkwardness and, for some people, anger and frustration also remain. But it's about the "we," not the "me," so I encourage you to start thinking in earnest about what you can change in a positive way that will smooth and improve the transition. I suggest making an actual list—writing down what you plan to do will make it more concrete for you. We need to make the effort to begin to trust each other again, and if you put yourself out there just a little more each day, with a smile or an open posture, you'll begin to get those same things back. It's going to take some time, but we can rebuild society by participating in it with open minds, hearts, and bodies. It won't be perfect, but good is better than perfect.

Find your own comfort level as you re-emerge. If you are an introvert, you may prefer to go for one-on-one interactions, but that doesn't mean you can't still make an effort to activate that EQ. If you're extroverted, try to listen and observe a little more and see what you can glean about what other people may be feeling. Then share a bit of yourself, and make room for them to share back, because they probably will. Understanding nonverbal communication and the role it plays in making you a more effective communication can be a game changer. This is your moment. Seize it.

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