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life advice

Communicate More Effectively with Proper Body Language

Your body language says more than you might think. Don't send mixed messages to your spouse by saying one thing with your mouth and another with your body.

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You could be saying the nicest things, but if your body language says the opposite, your words are lost.

You stand, hands on hips, elbows out, staring at the floor.

"What's wrong?" your spouse asks, "What did I do now?"

Surprised, you look up. "Nothing, why?"

"I dunno," he says. "Standing there like that, I figured you were about to yell at me."

You're confused. What made him think that? Later, you're trying to talk with your husband about the bills, and he's staring off somewhere in space.

"Uh, hello," you say, "I'm over here. I'm talking to you."

"I'm listening," he says, "What's the problem?"

You want to say, "You're not looking at me, that's the problem," but you feel stupid and petty, so you let it go. A couple of days go by. Your husband tells you he'd like to have a co-worker and his wife over for dinner.

"I don't know, Honey," you say, "I'll have to check my calendar."

"Well you don't have to get mad about it!" your spouse exclaims.

You're shocked: 'I'm not mad' you think to yourself, quite sure you answered him pleasantly enough and not feeling angry at him at all.

"Oh no?!" he retorts, "Look at you—you're standing there, your arms crossed over your chest, tapping your foot and scowling at me."

Sure enough, you are standing arms crossed, foot tapping, and yup, that feels like a scowl. You apologize, but as you walk away, you can't help but wonder, 'What is going on here?'

Lots! Only part of what we have to say comes through our mouths, a major portion of it comes through our bodies. And when your body language is in contradiction to your words, your body is what will be believed first.

So yes, when you're standing there, arms akimbo, your husband has every right to think you're about to yell at him, because standing that way is a common body-language expression of, "I've had it and I'm not taking any more!"

In the other scenario when your spouse didn't look at you while you were talking, it's perfectly natural for you to feel like he's not listening. For most of us, looking someone in the eyes when we talk is how we convey that we're serious about listening, that we're giving that person our full attention. Remember your mom or dad saying, "Look me in the eye when I'm talking to you!" She wasn't kidding.

And it's no wonder that your spouse thought you were angry at him, despite the pleasant tones of your voice: arms crossed over chest, foot tapping and scowling are all interpreted as signs of anger or frustration, coloring whatever you may have had to say.

Your body is you, physically expressed and it contributes in dynamic ways to your communication—whether consciously or not! Pay attention to what your body is saying, don't mislead your spouse into thinking you mean one thing when in truth you mean another. Be aware of your body language: if you're not tweaked at your Honey, then don't stand there, hands on hips and smile at him.

Instead, make good eye contact when you're speaking, it will probably encourage him to do the same. Sit beside your spouse for important conversations, putting yourself at equal level with him, keep your body still and undefended (no arms across chest). And smooth out the expression on your face, you want to make sure you're not frowning if you don't mean to.

All of these and many more are ways your body can support your communication and make whatever you say to your spouse be heard the way you intend it to be. Communicating is sometimes hard enough, these simple tips will prevent your message from getting lost in translation.

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