

Eye contact

Eye contact is the act of looking into someone's eyes. Eye contact is a very important aspect of nonverbal communication that is recognized not only throughout the human world, but in many species of animals as well. Maintaining eye contact during a conversation gives the impression that you are friendly and that you are paying attention to the other person. In some cultures, however, direct eye contact is considered rude or hostile. Understanding the message that you are sending through eye contact is important to improving communication.

It is important to understand the difference between eye contact and staring. While eye contact sends the message that you are confident, relaxed and interested in what the other person has to say, staring is considered rude and even threatening.

Understanding the difference between eye contact and staring is an advanced skill that can enhance your communication with others.

Staring involves looking solidly at the other person without a break. Many of us engaged in staring contests as children, and we still remember the uncomfortable feeling that generally accompanied the game. In a staring contest, the participants often avoid blinking, which leads to painful, watery eyes. Real-world staring does not mean failing to blink, but it does mean keeping one's eyes on another person without pausing. This behavior can make the other person feel uncomfortable, as if his or her personal space has been violated.

When maintaining normal eye contact, each person looks into the other's eyes and then away again. The speaker checks in visually with the listener and the listener confirms understanding through meeting the speaker's eyes. This process cycles through every few seconds throughout the duration of the conversation.

Generally, in western cultures, avoiding eye contact sends the message that you are uncomfortable in the situation. You may be perceived as rude, unfriendly or even arrogant. Depending on the circumstances, you may appear to be submissive. In a general sense, a lack of eye contact when someone is speaking communicates submission, while avoiding eye contact when questioned or queried indicates deceit.

Street traders know the importance of the eyes when using their selling skills to keep their potential buyers interested. When you are aroused or interested in an object your pupils will dilate and this is a big cue for salesmen all over the world.

The balance between too little eye contact and too much is delicate. Healthy eye contact within a two-way or small group conversation partly depends upon the group dynamics. If the conversational participants are familiar or emotionally close, a greater level of eye contact is often used. If the group members are naturally shy, however, less eye contact may occur. If you are in a new group and unsure how to use eye contact effectively, try mirroring the other participants.

Mirroring is a psychotherapeutic technique that is effective for communication with anyone. In mirroring, you actively pay attention to someone else's behavior and adjust yours to achieve similarity. Therefore, if the group seems to be looking back and forth from each other's eyes to the project at hand, try doing the same thing. In order to minimize confusion, you may wish to select just one person, perhaps the group leader, to mirror.

Public speaking situations require special care in eye contact. You will need to find a way to make each member of your audience feel drawn in, as if your speech is intended specifically for him or her.

To do this: try sweeping the room with your eyes. Find one person in each section, seated near the middle of that section. Direct your gaze toward that person for four or five seconds, then move on to the next section and repeat the process. As you move back and forth between sections, be sure to pick out a new person each time. An older public speaking technique was to direct your gaze just over the heads of the audience, at a point on the back wall. However, this technique tends to lead to you locking your eyes on that spot, making those in the middle section feel that they are being stared at and those on the sides feel ignored.

Avoiding eye contact is just as powerful a communication tool as maintaining eye contact. In social situations, we often encounter people that we would rather not speak with.

In many other situations, avoiding eye contact can be used sparingly to communicate a specific message. In a relationship that has natural boundaries, such as teacher-student or supervisor-subordinate, either party can use judicious avoidance of eye contact to maintain the boundary. This is often used to return a relationship to its natural state following a momentary breach of the usual boundaries.

In cross-cultural situations, the issue of eye contact can lead to serious misunderstandings. In Asian cultures, eye contact can be interpreted as threatening or hostile. Asian people are taught to avert their eyes as a sign of respect, particularly when dealing with their superiors. This is a simple cultural difference but may lead to innumerable problems. When an American and an Asian person meet in a business situation, the American may perceive the Asian person as insecure or even dishonest, while the Asian person may view the American as rude or threatening.

The animal kingdom tends to perceive direct eye contact as a challenge or sign of aggression. For example, the Center for Disease Control's dog bite prevention guide stresses the importance of avoiding eye contact with an unfamiliar dog. Dogs perceive direct eye contact as a sign of challenge and fight to maintain their position. Similar behavior has also been observed in bears and primates.

Eye contact is an extremely important part of body language and nonverbal communication. In the western cultures, eye contact is crucial on job interviews and in many other important human interactions.

4 Ways to improve your eye contact skills

Talking to a group – When talking to a group of people it is great to have direct contact with your listeners. Don't make the mistake of maintaining eye contact with just one person as this will stop the other members of the group from listening. To get past this, focus on a different member of the group with every new sentence. This way you are talking to all of the group and keeping them all interested.

Talking to an individual – It is great to maintain eye contact when talking to a person however it can become a bit creepy and uncomfortable if you stare intensely at them. To combat this, break eye contact every 5 seconds or so. When breaking the eye contact don't look down as this might indicate the ending of your part of the conversation. Instead, look up or to the side as if you are remembering something. Try it just now: don't move your head and think about the first time you started school. You will notice your eyes might move up or to the side as you try to remember this. So, when your listener sees this they will think you are trying to remember something and keep on listening to you.

Listening to someone – When you are listening to someone it can be off putting for the talker if you stare at them too hard. One technique is to use what a strategy called 'The triangle'. The strategy has the listener looking at one of the speaker's eyes for about 5 seconds, look at the other eye for 5 seconds and then look at the mouth for 5 seconds and keep on rotating in this way. This technique coupled with other listening skills such as nodding, occasional agreement words such as 'yes', 'Uh -huh' 'mm' etc is a great way to keep the talker talking and to show them you are interested in what they are saying.

Arguing – Arguing with someone is a skill in itself. If you want to compete in an argument holding the gaze shows strength. If you look away when arguing with someone you have all but lost the argument. Obviously, this depends on who you are arguing with but in general it is better to hold the gaze while you are making your point. Maintain eye contact when you are listening to the other person also.

Sources:

<https://www.everydayhealth.com/healthy-living/eye-contact-what-you-need-know/>

<https://www.stevenaitchison.co.uk/6-ways-to-dramatically-improve-your-eye-contact-skills/>