

Body Language in an Argument

By [Francesca Di Meglio](#)

[Married people argue](#)¹, sometimes a lot. When you disagree, your body communicates as much - if not more - than your words. Since most of us are not standing directly in front of a mirror (nor are we interested in such things during a heated argument), we have no idea what we're "saying" to our partners with our movements and gestures.

"Our body gestures are our earlier, more primitive means of communication, and they can reveal as much if not more than the words we express," writes John Demartini, a human behavior specialist at the [Demartini Institute](#)², which is a research and education organization. "Our words can be deceiving, but our body language can reveal our true feelings."



Body language speaks for us in an argument. © Photo by Francesca Di Meglio

Body Language - Di Meglio

While many of us have learned to think before we speak, we position our body involuntarily and without any thought at all. So, it's high time we learn exactly what our body language is saying for us. Here is a rundown of some of the more common positions you may take in an argument:

Folding Arms across Your Chest

How many times have you heard something you didn't like and folded your arms? Now that you think about it, you probably can remember doing this hundreds of times, especially if you're female. "Women tend to fold their arms across their chests if they are feeling defensive or hurt, to guard the solar plexus or heart center," writes [Kelly Seal](#)³, author of *Date Expectations: A Guide to Changing Your Dating Life* in Los Angeles, in an e-mail. "It's almost a reflex when they are feeling attacked." It tells your partner that you are on the defensive, and you're going to do everything to protect yourself by putting your arms between the you and the person with whom you're speaking. It also provides you with comfort.

Turning Your Back to Your Spouse

Your mother long ago taught you to look a person in the eye when you speak to him or her. We've all apologized to someone for having our shoulders to them at a party or on the metro when there is no other way to sit or stand. Yet, when we get angry, we sometimes give our back to our spouse. "Turning your back to someone symbolizes, 'I am shutting you out because you have touched an emotional soft spot, so I have to protect my heart,'" writes Nekisha-Michelle Kee, a relationship columnist and owner of the matchmaking firm [Urban Love Seekers](#)⁴ in Los Angeles, in an e-mail. It can also be a defense mechanism, especially for men, who avoid eye contact when they feel threatened, writes Seal.

Finger Pointing

Just about everyone has wagged a finger in someone's face. Parents are often especially guilty of this when their child is being mischievous. And we definitely point the finger at our spouse, both literally and figuratively, every now and then. "Pointing an index finger in the face says, 'I am in control over you so stare at the tip of my finger, the focal point of my rage,'" writes [Daria M. Brezinski](#)⁵, executive director of What Wize Women Want in Charlottesville, Va. "I can get really violent, and this is the first sign of my physicality." Most of us don't jump from finger pointing to a punch in the face, but once we raise that finger, we should take a time out to cool off. Clearly, we're getting aggressive and overheated. And we don't want to say or do things we'll regret later.

Getting in Your Spouse's Face

This is brutal and a clear sign that you have to step away from the argument. If you are leaning forward and talking or yelling in your spouse's face, you're invading his or her space. It's threatening and could even scare your spouse. It will either make your spouse get more aggressive or shut down completely, both of which are negative outcomes that you should avoid. "When you're in my face, so close I can count your teeth, you're saying, 'I am smarter than you, I am stronger than you, and you better listen or else,'" writes Kee. You're supposed to be partners on equal footing, so you should really try to avoid this gesture. Besides, this kind of aggression will never allow for either one of you to be heard in an argument. In other words, it's futile and won't help resolve anything.

Condescending Facial Expressions

Rolling your eyes, nodding as though you've heard this all before, or using your face to poke fun at your spouse is the body language equivalent of [calling your spouse names](#)⁶. When you make these facial expressions, you're telling people that you don't care what they have to say because they are dumber than you. You're saying, "I'm right and you're wrong." Maybe the other person is repeating things you've already heard (and with which you still disagree). But you should listen respectfully all the same. "The reason other people are repeating their stance is because they think you haven't heard the first (or second or third time), or else this position is so important to them that they feel it bears repeating," writes April Masini, who authors the [Ask April advice](#)

[column](#)⁷. Obviously, the information is important to them, so it better become important to you. You don't have to agree but you have to be respectful and acknowledge their thoughts and feelings.

There are as many gestures and movements as there are people, but now that you know the common ones, you can pay better attention. Use this body language as a warning in [an argument](#)⁸. Don't be afraid to take a step back, go for a walk, or just move into another room for some alone time, so you can cool off. Then, take up the argument at another time, when cooler heads will prevail, and your love for each other can shine.

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