

The eyes have it ...

By Wendy Ann Morgan, R.N., B.Sc.N.

Have you ever stared at someone, without saying a word or making any gestures, until you finally got their attention? This illustrates the power and influence that eye contact can exert!

The nonverbal is the oldest form of communication; it is the feeling level of communication. What is said with the eyes is a unique expression of a nonverbal phenomena. (Harper, Weins & Matarazzo, 1978). By looking at someone's eyes, often their thoughts are shown to you but at the same time, you are telling them something of yourself. It is difficult to camouflage the thoughts that are expressed by the eyes — your lips may be smiling, but your eyes may be giving a completely opposite message. By meeting someone's gaze, you can signal a desire for communication to take place or you can let someone know that you are listening to them; by avoiding a gaze, communication is usually terminated.

The patients often come to the operating room nervous and very frightened. What do they see? Equipment — strange; noises — unfamiliar; people — dressed in Hallowe'en type garb; and eyes — mostly what they see are eyes.

Eyes communicate

What do your eyes convey to the patient? Caring — you know they are all individuals with different needs and you want to protect their right to that individuality; boredom — ho hum, not another gall bladder, this is the fourth one today; anger — this doctor is the physical pits, he was so nasty to me last month but I'll get him today.

The operating room is a unique area in the hospital as far as nursing is concerned. Many people, including some operating room nurses, consider operating room nursing to be a purely technical job and not really nursing at all. True, operating room nursing has many technical aspects, but the human element remains and cannot be removed. Every patient

is different and responds to approaching surgery in a different way; they have special needs that must be met so that they can consider their surgical experience in a positive rather than a negative way.

Sensitivity

Communication in the operating room takes place on a different level — much of it is nonverbal and as the saying goes, "actions speak louder than words."

Patients in the operating room often have an increased sensitivity to their surroundings due to their usually high anxiety level. When all that is revealed to them is a pair of eyes — or ten — a very real barrier to communication may be presented. The operating room nurse must be very sensitive to the needs of the patient; the nurse must look for nonverbal cues, often revealed in the patient's eyes, (Davis, 1978) and present herself as a caring person interested in that patient as an individual, not just an operation or a disease entity. The patient is totally dependent on the nurses in the operating room, whether having a general, local or block anaesthesia.

The art of listening

Your eyes tell a story; they tell the patient that you are listening and that what they have to say is important. According to Munn (1977), listening "makes people feel special, and it's the special OR nurse who can listen." It is important to let your patients know that you are listening to them, just as it is important for your co-workers to know that you are also listening to them. Often combined with a touch, your eyes tell the patients that you care and you will give them the best care possible while they are with you. It is important to be responsive to your patient's needs. Usually you have such short contact with your patient

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that you must pick up immediately on any cues that they give you.

If you are angry with a co-worker, be it a nurse, doctor, aide or orderly, a patient may sense that anger displayed in your eyes and your manner and perceive that you are angry with him for some reason and he may go to sleep wondering how well you will be taking care of him. This could conceivably affect his post-operative recovery period.

Humour in its place

Humour also has an important part in our lives, but there is a time and a place for it. If the patient reads in your eyes that life is a big joke to you, he may drift off to sleep wondering if he really is important to you or is he just another joke.

It is also important to attend to what you say with your eyes to your fellow workers. It can make either a very comfortable work situation or an uncomfortable one depending on what you are communicating to each other with your eyes. Caring — that you make a difference to how well the day goes; boredom — don't bother me with any of your problems, I have enough of my own; disbelief — I can't believe you actually did such a dumb thing; anger — I don't like working with you and I know we are going to have a rotten day; humour — even in the face of all adversity; listening — what you have to say matters to me and is important.

Clarify the message

The people that you work with are also under a lot of pressure. It is very important to remember this as you work closely together in a series of high stress situations throughout the day. Clarify the messages that are being received. If the eyes are telling you one thing but verbally a different message is coming through, get it out in the open and see which message is the real one. It is probably the nonverbal one that is the true one. Unless the air is cleared, the patient is the one who loses out by lack of caring personnel too caught up in their own missed messages to respond to the patient's messages.

In the helping professions, communication is very

important. It can make the difference between a patient knowing that you are really interested in his personal welfare or wondering if he is a minor irritation in your otherwise perfect day. In the operating room, because much of the communication is nonverbal, via the eyes, it is important to be aware of the messages that you are sending. As the nurse and head of the operating room team, it is up to you to set the example for the other members of the group. Even in everyday life, you should be aware of the messages that are being communicated with your eyes. Even a raised eyebrow at the wrong moment may cause no end of grief. If you happen to be at an auction, you may go home with the white elephant.

As mentioned before, it is important to be aware of what you are communicating nonverbally to others. This point cannot be stressed enough. People may easily misinterpret what you are telling them: the patient because he is nervous and upset, your co-workers because they are working under stress and may have too high an anxiety level to accurately perceive the true message. Your eyes are the most revealing part of your person, because often in the operating room, it is the only part of your person that is revealed for public inspection.

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About the author

Wendy Ann Morgan, R.N., B.Sc.N., is currently a staff nurse, operating room, Riverside Hospital, Ottawa, Ontario. Ms. Morgan received her R.N. from the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton and her B.Sc.N. from the University of Alberta, Edmonton.



1 Most psychologists identify six principal expressions of emotion: disgust, anger, fear, sadness, happiness and surprise.

2 Although not considered here, other psychologists include shame and fear. What is shown on the two pages are the



4 six principal expressions of emotion as evinced by the eyes alone. Each is numbered to enable you to identify which

emotion is being expressed. See page 30 where the numbers are matched to the emotion expressed.