Communicating without words – just by using body language and other nonverbal actions – is a powerful form of expression. Indeed, actions and other nonverbal signs often “speak” much louder than words.

Nonverbal actions have always been important. When the Greek philosopher Demosthenes was asked what mattered in speech, he answered, "Action." This answer is also relevant today. People tend to believe actions even more than words. And they believe words even more when nonverbal actions closely match them.

Support group leaders and peer visitors can use nonverbal actions in their work with people who have amputations. Doing so improves communication and understanding. This article looks at factors that affect nonverbal actions.

**Distance**

Distance – how near or far one person is from another – conveys a nonverbal message. Being far away or moving back can seem “standoffish,” a form of rejection or lack of
caring. But being too close sometimes feels uncomfortable, especially when one person feels that another is in his or her “space.”

How far should people be from each other? This distance depends on culture and personal choice. For most Americans, people should be about 30 to 36 inches apart.

**Movement**

Movement – where you position yourself and how you move around a room – is also a factor in communication. It works well when support group leaders or public speakers move slowly, not quickly, toward and away from others. One way to make this happen is by arranging furniture so that the leader can move around and face people as he or she is speaking. This gives the nonverbal message, "I am interested in you." This message is not as strong when speakers or group leaders stay in one place or stand behind a podium.

**Orientation**

This refers to whether speakers and listeners face each other, sit side by side, or have their backs to one another. In support groups, leaders get most attention when they face the group so everyone can see who is talking. Communication may not go as well when
people turn away from each other.

**Communicating One on One**

Communication between two people is different from speaking with a group. It works best when people sit or stand next to each other. They should be at the same eye level (not with one person sitting and the other standing). This is why an able-bodied person may sit or crouch when talking with someone in a wheelchair.

**Posture**

This refers not only to how straight a person stands, but also how he or she sits. Standing or sitting straight shows others that you have something worthwhile to say. It is a much more powerful posture than slouching. Sitting with your legs crossed seems informal and conveys a sense that you are relaxed. Sitting or standing with your arms crossed can express disagreement or opposition. Support group leaders should use posture to their advantage by standing tall, walking tall, and sitting tall.
Physical Contact

Physical contact includes touching, holding, hugging and patting other people on the back. These nonverbal actions send powerful messages – both good and bad. For instance, one friend can sense that the other wants a hug. This can express understanding, empathy, intimacy, and caring. But hugs may be not as wanted when people are not friends or do not like being touched.

Facial Expressions

From childhood on, people know how to “read” facial expressions. These include smiles, frowns, raised eyebrows, yawns, and sneers. Studies show that facial expressions convey more meaning than either words or tone of voice. For instance, people can show happiness when they smile or anger when they clench their jaws.

As a support group leader or public speaker, pay attention not just to your own facial expressions but also that of your audience. But do not assume that you always know what facial expressions mean. Instead, ask people if you are correctly “reading” their facial expressions.
Gestures

Some gestures, like making fists or pointing fingers, are seen as forceful and negative. But a lack of gestures can seem dull and boring. Active and dynamic speakers or leaders should use natural gestures, but make them bigger. Take a look at your own gestures by asking someone to videotape you or practicing in front of a mirror.

Gestures are possible for everyone – even those with arm and hand amputations or an absence of upper limbs. People with upper-extremity amputations can gesture with their prostheses or residual limbs. And people without arms can gesture with their shoulders or feet. Just as with hand movements, gestures like these help others understand what you are saying.

Eye Contact

Eye contact (looking directly at peoples’ eyes) is powerful and helps build feelings of trust and rapport. In fact, many people perceive eyes as “talking.” When you speak, focus on the eyes (not the mouth or other parts of the face) of people you are talking with. Making eye contact can send the nonverbal message, "I am speaking to you." When you listen, eye
contact lets the other person know, "I hear you." But be careful not to overdo eye contact. Do not look at any one person for more than 7 seconds – this can seem like staring and feel uncomfortable or aggressive.

Make sure to also pay attention to other peoples’ eye contact with you. This is most important when emotions are high. For instance, when you meet a new amputee for the first time, he or she may avoid eye contact. This might mean "I don't want to talk now" or "I don't want to discuss my feelings with you."

**Environment**

This includes how you arrange furniture in a room. Furniture arranged auditorium-style (chairs lined up in front of a table or podium) can convey a sense that the speaker’s job is to speak and others should simply listen. Instead, you might want to arrange chairs in a square or circle to encourage interaction and group discussion.

When meeting one on one or in small groups, make sure the environment is private and quiet. Doing so lets others know that "this conversation is important and I want to give it my full attention."
Paralanguage

This term refers to tone, pitch, quality of voice, and rate of speaking. These should match, not clash with, what you are saying. For instance, you would communicate differently when talking about something sad than when discussing a new group program.

Silence

Not saying anything says a lot. Silence also helps others speak up. For instance, during peer visitation with a new amputee, wait in silence if the other person does not immediately speak up. This gives him or her time to think and respond. If you speak too quickly or too much, the other person might never say what is on his or her mind. Use silence wisely – waiting neither too long nor too short a time before you speak up.

Match Nonverbal Actions to Your Spoken Words

Your nonverbal actions should match and harmonize with your words. If not, they can confuse the audience and cancel your message. For instance, you would not smile and gesture broadly when saying something sad. Nor would you speak quietly without gestures if you are excited about a topic. Whether you are leading a support group, talking
one on one, or speaking in front of an audience, make sure your nonverbal actions help communicate your spoken words.

**Ways to Learn More:**

- How to Be a Better Facilitator, AKA, Improving Your Facilitating Skills

- Improving Your Listening Skills

- Verbal & Nonverbal Communication
  [http://www.cod.edu/Course/MGT100/mgtcomm.htm](http://www.cod.edu/Course/MGT100/mgtcomm.htm)