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Body Language Tips for Emergency Physicians About to Testify

By Ms. Wood and Dr. Segan | on August 14, 2014 | 0 Comment



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You are sitting in a hard chair on a raised platform being asked question after question by a hard-hitting attorney while a courtroom full of people watches

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your every move. Welcome to the hot seat! As a physician testifying as a defendant or serving as an expert witness, your experience on the stand can be daunting. Understanding how to use nonverbal communication to exude confidence and credibility will make a difference in the outcome.

Here are the keys to ensuring your nonverbal communication conveys the same message of impeccable integrity as your words.

You want to look powerful, like a true expert, but not appear arrogant.

It is important to know that how you hold your body can actually change how you feel. You can influence how you look and feel on the stand by consciously controlling your nonverbal cues.

Under stress, the limbic brain normally makes us freeze, flee, fight, faint, or give up. You may react by freezing in place, pulling your body back so you appear to be fleeing, or folding in your limbs to look small. Other reactions to stress may include becoming tense and angry or going limp and giving up. You can take steps to reduce those stress responses and improve your credibility.

You want to be aware of the dance between you and the opposing counsel and avoid being reactive to the opposing team's attorney.

Take Up Space

You want to look powerful, like a true expert, but not appear arrogant. Instead of going still and getting small, take up space and get big. When you need a shot of confidence, put your arms on the armrest of your chair or stretch out your feet a bit. Research says that women on the stand tend to perch on the edge of the seat and arch their backs, which makes them look less powerful. Men tend to slouch and rely more on the backrest, which makes them appear disrespectful. Purposefully vary your position to be in control, but when you feel stressed, get big.

Project Openness

Imagine that there are "windows" on the front of your body: on the knees, pelvis, heart, mouth, eyes, and palms of the hands. These body windows can be open or closed. You want to keep your windows open to look honest and

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unafraid. The most important windows for credibility are on the palms of the hands. The limbic brain of the viewer senses danger and dishonesty when the palms of someone's hands are hidden. Keep your hands open and in view on the table or the arms of the chair. Gesture normally, but don't use sharp, cutting, or poking motions that can be read as symbolic weapons.

Stay Up

When you're confident and honest, your gestures move up, your head comes up, your shoulders come up and back, and you sit and move in a way that directs your energy upward. People who are afraid and/or are lying have difficulty moving and staying up.

Get Grounded

When people are nervous, they tend to either move a lot or freeze. Here's a trick: when you're in the thick of the most difficult questions and want to achieve the highest levels of cognition, place both feet firmly on the ground, setting them slightly apart. This placement actually makes it easier to utilize both hemispheres of the brain—the rational and the creative/emotional. If you feel yourself freeze, move your feet apart and/or forward to feel strong.

Lean Into It

We tend to pull back when we are fearful or offended by a question. Lean forward as you listen to show you are interested and confident. You can lean forward with your head, your upper torso, or your whole body to show you are connecting to what the lawyer is saying and you are not afraid. Lean in when you are being questioned by your team to show respect, but don't overdo it—you're not trying to "get in their face." So don't lean forward quickly or aggressively; just aim for gentle timely leans.

Speak With Strength

Everyone, but especially women, should be sure that their voices stay strong until the end of each sentence. Going up in pitch at the end of your sentences makes you sound unsure of yourself. Practice answering questions with a confident voice going down in pitch, steady and strong in volume, until the end of your sentences.

Match Your Movement and Your Words

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Make sure your gestures and movements match what you are saying. If you say, "That is accurate," and shake your head "no," the jury will believe your body language, not your words. Be careful of being too scripted or automatic. If your emotions, facial expressions and gestures do not match, you seem less genuine.

Keep Your Hands Away From Your Face

Be careful of showing "stress cues." When we feel stressed, the nerve endings fire at the tip of the nose, edge of the ears, around the mouth, and around the eyes. You may have an urge to touch or rub your face. Don't! It makes you look uncertain or dishonest. If you need to comfort yourself, briefly place a hand on your leg out of view, which will help you feel anchored.

Mind Your Mouth

The mouth is the source of truth and lies. Avoid licking your lips or pressing your lips tightly together. Keep hydrated, and keep your lips relaxed.

Giving a deposition or testifying in a trial is an experience that is part of being an emergency physician. Knowing the nonverbal messages that people use to ascertain whether you are telling the truth will help ensure you are perceived as being the credible witness you are.



Ms. Wood is a body language consultant and professional speaker and the author of eight books. She is interviewed weekly by national media, including CNN, Fox News, Today, The History Channel, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, and Psychology Today. You can contact her at Patti@PattiWood.net.



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