

READ MY HIPS – EMOTIONS INTERPRETED BY BODY LANGUAGE MORE THAN FACIAL EXPRESSIONS.

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We've all seen it... the clock's winding down, game tied, that final push, one last try... And then... the look of joy! Or, wait, is it shock? Disappointment? If you are looking just at the player's face, you may not be able to tell for sure. That's because the facial expressions that accompany intense emotions often can look surprisingly similar. Determining the emotional state of others is really important for us to know how to act in social situations, and we almost always get it right. So how do we do it? How do we tell if someone is extremely happy or sad? We'd probably all agree that emotions show in the face – indeed, faces tell a great many things about someone. But are there any other things about a person that we can use as clues to their emotional state?

New Neuroscience research from Israel and the United States asked just this question, and they went a step further too. They proposed that body language might also help us to decide if someone is happy or sad. Here's how they tested if this hunch was correct. First, they took pictures of tennis players who had just won or just lost a match point. For each they made three sets of photos: 1) the original photo, 2) the original photo with the face removed, and 3) just the face from the original photo. Then they asked 45 participants to view the photos and rate the emotion of the person in the photo on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being happiest and 10 being saddest. Participants easily recognized the winners and losers if they looked at the original photos. And if they looked at the original photos with the faces removed they were spot-on again. A bit odd perhaps, but get this: when participants looked at faces alone, they were only correct about half the time. If you weren't expecting that, then you are in the majority – 80% of people believe that they can judge someone else's emotions by looking only at their face. Just to double-check, the researchers repeated the study with photos from other high-emotion situations, including people crying at funerals or winning big prizes on reality TV. But again, they found the same thing – without body language to provide some additional clues, facial expressions alone were not enough to read the emotions of others.

This surprising new information could be used to develop more clever advertising. A bit scary, I suppose. But it may also be used to develop better treatment strategies for people with autism who are poor at recognising emotion in others.

REFERENCES

Aviezer et al. (2012) "Body Cues, Not Facial Expressions, Discriminate Between Intense Positive and Negative Emotions." *Science* Vol. 338 no. 6111 pp. 1225-1229 DOI: 10.1126/science.1224313