



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Experts estimate that communication with words is only 7 percent of the total message we give to others. A much larger percentage of our communications are conveyed nonverbally. Clothing, posture, grooming, facial expressions, body carriage, and gestures are all nonverbal symbols. These messages transmit a variety of information that usually becomes the basis of our first impression of a person.

Whether or not their perceptions are fair or accurate, other people do base some of their judgments about each of us on nonverbal signals. Also, we may not want to admit it, but we make the same type of judgments about them.

Sometimes first impressions are false, but very often they are not. The accuracy of the first impression you make is particularly important in situations where you have an opportunity for only one encounter with a particular person or group. Examples of such situations include interviews or competitions for state and regional awards.

When we make favorable first impressions, we begin to feel comfortable and accepted. Almost everyone desires to belong and to feel accepted. People use a variety of ways to gain acceptance. One way is to try to match their own appearance to that of others. You and your friends may like to wear similar clothes and hairstyles. These nonverbal symbols communicate that you are a part of the group and accepted by the others. Another way that people try to seek acceptance is by dressing appropriately for certain occasions and circumstances. For example, if you are applying for a job, you might dress differently than you would for relaxing with friends.

Sometimes the messages our appearances communicate are not received the way we intend. You and your friends may think your appearance communicates one message, but other people think your appearance means something else. As a receiver, the individual's first impressions are based on a personal frame of reference. Our community, family, friends, education, and experiences contribute to the kinds of judgments we make. Therefore, our judgment of others is greatly influenced by our own approaches to dress and grooming.

Researchers have found that in some situations the first impression may become lasting and unchanging even after additional contacts with the person. This is most likely to happen if the first impression is "colored" by perceptions of certain unclear traits, such as smart or dumb, good or bad, and honest or dishonest. If someone is positively impressed with a person at the first meeting, he or she will credit that person with positive traits and skills that may not have any relationship to the first encounter or to the individual. For example, a teacher who likes the way a student looks and behaves on the first day of class may assume the student is smart. Throughout the year, the student may make excellent grades even though they are not always earned. Unfortunately, the reverse of this situation can also occur when someone makes a negative impression.

Source: Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, College of Agriculture.