

Amy Cuddy: Your body language shapes who you are



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So I want to start by offering you a free no-tech life hack, and all it requires of you is this: that you change your posture for two minutes. But before I give it away, I want to ask you to right now do a little audit of your body and what you're doing with your body. So how many of you are sort of making yourselves smaller? Maybe you're hunching, crossing your legs, maybe wrapping your ankles. Sometimes we hold onto our arms like this. Sometimes we spread out. (Laughter) I see you. (Laughter)

So I want you to pay attention to what you're doing right now. We're going to come back to that in a few minutes, and I'm hoping that if you learn to tweak this a little bit, it could significantly change the way your life unfolds.

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So, we're really fascinated with body language, and we're particularly interested in other people's body language. You know, we're interested in, like, you know — (Laughter) — an awkward interaction, or a smile, or a contemptuous glance, or maybe a very awkward wink, or maybe even something like a handshake.

Narrator: Here they are arriving at Number 10, and look at this lucky policeman gets to shake hands with the President of the United States. Oh, and here comes the Prime Minister of the — ? No. (Laughter) (Applause)

So a handshake, or the lack of a handshake, can have us talking for weeks and weeks and weeks. Even the BBC and The New York Times. So obviously when we think about nonverbal behavior, or body language -- but we call it nonverbals as social scientists -- it's language, so we think about communication. When we think about communication, we think about interactions. So what is your body language communicating to me? What's mine communicating to you?

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And there's a lot of reason to believe that this is a valid way to look at this. So social scientists have spent a lot of time looking at the effects of our body language, or other people's body language, on judgments. And we make sweeping judgments and inferences from body language. And those judgments can predict really meaningful life outcomes like who we hire or promote, and who we ask out on a date.

For example, Nalini Ambady, a researcher at Tufts University, shows that when people watch 30-minute, 30-second soundless clips of real physician-patient interactions, their judgments of the physician's niceness predict whether or not that physician will be sued. So

it doesn't have to do so much with whether or not that physician was incompetent, but do we like that person and how they interacted?

Even more dramatic, Alex Todorov at Princeton has shown us that judgments of political candidates' faces in just one second predict 70 percent of U.S. Senate and gubernatorial race outcomes, and even, let's go digital, emoticons used well in online negotiations can lead to you claim more value from that negotiation. If you use them poorly, bad idea. Right? So when we think of nonverbals, we think of how we judge others, how they judge us and what the outcomes are. We tend to forget, though, the other audience that's influenced by our nonverbals, and that's ourselves.

We are also influenced by our nonverbals, our thoughts and our feelings and our physiology. So what nonverbals am I talking about? I'm a social psychologist. I study prejudice, and I teach at a competitive business school, so it was inevitable that I would become interested in power dynamics. I became especially interested in nonverbal expressions of power and dominance.

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And what are nonverbal expressions of power and dominance? Well, this is what they are. So in the animal kingdom, they are about expanding. So you make yourself big, you stretch out, you take up space, you're basically opening up. It's about opening up. And this is true across the animal kingdom. It's not just limited to primates. And humans do the same thing. (Laughter) So they do this both when they have power sort of chronically, and also when they're feeling powerful in the moment. And this one is especially interesting because it really shows us how universal and old these expressions of power are. This expression, which is known as pride, Jessica Tracy has studied. She shows that people who are born with sight and people who are congenitally blind do this when they win at a physical competition. So when they cross the finish line and they've won, it doesn't matter if they've never seen anyone do it. They do this. So the arms up in the V, the chin is slightly lifted. What do we do when we feel powerless? We do exactly the opposite. We close up. We wrap ourselves up. We make ourselves small. We don't want to bump into the person next to us. So again, both animals and humans do the same thing.

And this is what happens when you put together high and low power. So what we tend to do when it comes to power is that we complement the other's nonverbals. So if someone is being really powerful with us, we tend to make ourselves smaller. We don't mirror them. We do the opposite of them.

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So I'm watching this behavior in the classroom, and what do I notice? I notice that MBA students really exhibit the full range of power nonverbals. So you have people who are like caricatures of alphas, really coming into the room, they get right into the middle of the room before class even starts, like they really want to occupy space. When they sit down, they're sort of spread out. They raise their hands like this. You have other people who are virtually collapsing when they come in. As soon as they come in, you see it. You see it on their faces and their bodies, and they sit in their chair and they make themselves tiny, and they go like this when they raise their hand. I notice a couple of things about this. One,

you're not going to be surprised. It seems to be related to gender. So women are much more likely to do this kind of thing than men. Women feel chronically less powerful than men, so this is not surprising. But the other thing I noticed is that it also seemed to be related to the extent to which the students were participating, and how well they were participating. And this is really important in the MBA classroom, because participation counts for half the grade.

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So business schools have been struggling with this gender grade gap. You get these equally qualified women and men coming in and then you get these differences in grades, and it seems to be partly attributable to participation. So I started to wonder, you know, okay, so you have these people coming in like this, and they're participating. Is it possible that we could get people to fake it and would it lead them to participate more?

So my main collaborator Dana Carney, who's at Berkeley, and I really wanted to know, can you fake it till you make it? Like, can you do this just for a little while and actually experience a behavioral outcome that makes you seem more powerful? So we know that our nonverbals govern how other people think and feel about us. There's a lot of evidence. But our question really was, do our nonverbals govern how we think and feel about ourselves? There's some evidence that they do. So, for example, we smile when we feel happy, but also, when we're forced to smile by holding a pen in our teeth like this, it makes us feel happy. So it goes both ways. When it comes to power, it also goes both ways. So when you feel powerful, you're more likely to do this, but it's also possible that when you pretend to be powerful, you are more likely to actually feel powerful.

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So the second question really was, you know, so we know that our minds change our bodies, but is it also true that our bodies change our minds? And when I say minds, in the case of the powerful, what am I talking about? So I'm talking about thoughts and feelings and the sort of physiological things that make up our thoughts and feelings, and in my case, that's hormones. I look at hormones. So what do the minds of the powerful versus the powerless look like? So powerful people tend to be, not surprisingly, more assertive and more confident, more optimistic. They actually feel that they're going to win even at games of chance. They also tend to be able to think more abstractly. So there are a lot of differences. They take more risks. There are a lot of differences between powerful and powerless people. Physiologically, there also are differences on two key hormones: testosterone, which is the dominance hormone, and cortisol, which is the stress hormone. So what we find is that high-power alpha males in primate hierarchies have high testosterone and low cortisol, and powerful and effective leaders also have high testosterone and low cortisol. So what does that mean? When you think about power, people tended to think only about testosterone, because that was about dominance. But really, power is also about how you react to stress. So do you want the high-power leader that's dominant, high on testosterone, but really stress reactive? Probably not, right? You want the person who's powerful and assertive and dominant, but not very stress reactive, the person who's laid back.

So we know that in primate hierarchies, if an alpha needs to take over, if an individual needs to take over an alpha role sort of suddenly, within a few days, that individual's testosterone has gone up significantly and his cortisol has dropped significantly. So we have this evidence, both that the body can shape the mind, at least at the facial level, and also that role changes can shape the mind. So what happens, okay, you take a role change, what happens if you do that at a really minimal level, like this tiny manipulation, this tiny intervention? "For two minutes," you say, "I want you to stand like this, and it's going to make you feel more powerful."

So this is what we did. We decided to bring people into the lab and run a little experiment, and these people adopted, for two minutes, either high-power poses or low-power poses, and I'm just going to show you five of the poses, although they took on only two. So here's one. A couple more. This one has been dubbed the "Wonder Woman" by the media. Here are a couple more. So you can be standing or you can be sitting. And here are the low-power poses. So you're folding up, you're making yourself small. This one is very low-power. When you're touching your neck, you're really protecting yourself. So this is what happens. They come in, they spit into a vial, we for two minutes say, "You need to do this or this. "They don't look at pictures of the poses. We don't want to prime them with a concept of power. We want them to be feeling power, right? So two minutes they do this. We then ask them, "How powerful do you feel?" on a series of items, and then we give them an opportunity to gamble, and then we take another saliva sample. That's it. That's the whole experiment.

So this is what we find. Risk tolerance, which is the gambling, what we find is that when you're in the high-power pose condition, 86 percent of you will gamble. When you're in the low-power pose condition, only 60 percent, and that's a pretty whopping significant difference. Here's what we find on testosterone. From their baseline when they come in, high-power people experience about a 20-percent increase, and low-power people experience about a 10-percent decrease. So again, two minutes, and you get these changes. Here's what you get on cortisol. High-power people experience about a 25-percent decrease, and the low-power people experience about a 15-percent increase. So two minutes lead to these hormonal changes that configure your brain to basically be either assertive, confident and comfortable, or really stress-reactive, and, you know, feeling sort of shut down. And we've all had the feeling, right? So it seems that our nonverbals do govern how we think and feel about ourselves, so it's not just others, but it's also ourselves. Also, our bodies change our minds.

But the next question, of course, is can power posing for a few minutes really change your life in meaningful ways? So this is in the lab. It's this little task, you know, it's just a couple of minutes. Where can you actually apply this? Which we cared about, of course. And so we think it's really, what matters, I mean, where you want to use this is evaluative situations like social threat situations. Where are you being evaluated, either by your friends? Like for teenagers it's at the lunchroom table. It could be, you know, for some people it's speaking at

a school board meeting. It might be giving a pitch or giving a talk like this or doing a job interview. We decided that the one that most people could relate to because most people had been through was the job interview.

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So we published these findings, and the media are all over it, and they say, Okay, so this is what you do when you go in for the job interview, right? (Laughter) You know, so we were of course horrified, and said, Oh my God, no, no, no, that's not what we meant at all. For numerous reasons, no, no, no, don't do that. Again, this is not about you talking to other people. It's you talking to yourself. What do you do before you go into a job interview? You do this. Right? You're sitting down. You're looking at your iPhone -- or your Android, not trying to leave anyone out. You are, you know, you're looking at your notes, you're hunching up, making yourself small, when really what you should be doing maybe is this, like, in the bathroom, right? Do that. Find two minutes. So that's what we want to test. Okay? So we bring people into a lab, and they do either high- or low-power poses again, they go through a very stressful job interview. It's five minutes long. They are being recorded. They're being judged also, and the judges are trained to give no nonverbal feedback, so they look like this. Like, imagine this is the person interviewing you. So for five minutes, nothing, and this is worse than being heckled. People hate this. It's what Marianne LaFrance calls "standing in social quicksand." So this really spikes your cortisol. So this is the job interview we put them through, because we really wanted to see what happened. We then have these coders look at these tapes, four of them. They're blind to the hypothesis. They're blind to the conditions. They have no idea who's been posing in what pose, and they end up looking at these sets of tapes, and they say, "Oh, we want to hire these people," -- all the high-power posers -- "we don't want to hire these people. We also evaluate these people much more positively overall." But what's driving it? It's not about the content of the speech. It's about the presence that they're bringing to the speech. We also, because we rate them on all these variables related to competence, like, how well-structured is the speech? How good is it? What are their qualifications? No effect on those things. This is what's affected. These kinds of things. People are bringing their true selves, basically. They're bringing themselves. They bring their ideas, but as themselves, with no, you know, residue over them. So this is what's driving the effect, or mediating the effect.

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So when I tell people about this, that our bodies change our minds and our minds can change our behavior, and our behavior can change our outcomes, they say to me, "I don't -- It feels fake." Right? So I said, fake it till you make it. I don't -- It's not me. I don't want to get there and then still feel like a fraud. I don't want to feel like an impostor. I don't want to get there only to feel like I'm not supposed to be here. And that really resonated with me, because I want to tell you a little story about being an impostor and feeling like I'm not supposed to be here.

When I was 19, I was in a really bad car accident. I was thrown out of a car, rolled several times. I was thrown from the car. And I woke up in a head injury rehab ward, and I had been withdrawn from college, and I learned that my IQ had dropped by two standard

deviations, which was very traumatic. I knew my IQ because I had identified with being smart, and I had been called gifted as a child. So I'm taken out of college, I keep trying to go back. They say, "You're not going to finish college. Just, you know, there are other things for you to do, but that's not going to work out for you." So I really struggled with this, and I have to say, having your identity taken from you, your core identity, and for me it was being smart, having that taken from you, there's nothing that leaves you feeling more powerless than that. So I felt entirely powerless. I worked and worked and worked, and I got lucky, and worked, and got lucky, and worked.

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Eventually I graduated from college. It took me four years longer than my peers, and I convinced someone, my angel advisor, Susan Fiske, to take me on, and so I ended up at Princeton, and I was like, I am not supposed to be here. I am an impostor. And the night before my first-year talk, and the first-year talk at Princeton is a 20-minute talk to 20 people. That's it. I was so afraid of being found out the next day that I called her and said, "I'm quitting." She was like, "You are not quitting, because I took a gamble on you, and you're staying. You're going to stay, and this is what you're going to do. You are going to fake it. You're going to do every talk that you ever get asked to do. You're just going to do it and do it and do it, even if you're terrified and just paralyzed and having an out-of-body experience, until you have this moment where you say, 'Oh my gosh, I'm doing it. Like, I have become this. I am actually doing this.'" So that's what I did. Five years in grad school, a few years, you know, I'm at Northwestern, I moved to Harvard, I'm at Harvard, I'm not really thinking about it anymore, but for a long time I had been thinking, "Not supposed to be here. Not supposed to be here."

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So at the end of my first year at Harvard, a student who had not talked in class the entire semester, who I had said, "Look, you've gotta participate or else you're going to fail," came into my office. I really didn't know her at all. And she said, she came in totally defeated, and she said, "I'm not supposed to be here." And that was the moment for me. Because two things happened. One was that I realized, oh my gosh, I don't feel like that anymore. You know. I don't feel that anymore, but she does, and I get that feeling. And the second was, she is supposed to be here! Like, she can fake it, she can become it. So I was like, "Yes, you are! You are supposed to be here! And tomorrow you're going to fake it, you're going to make yourself powerful, and, you know, you're gonna — " (Applause) (Applause) "And you're going to go into the classroom, and you are going to give the best comment ever. "You know? And she gave the best comment ever, and people turned around and they were like, oh my God, I didn't even notice her sitting there, you know? (Laughter)

She comes back to me months later, and I realized that she had not just faked it till she made it, she had actually faked it till she became it. So she had changed. And so I want to say to you, don't fake it till you make it. Fake it till you become it. You know? It's not — Do it enough until you actually become it and internalize.

The last thing I'm going to leave you with is this. Tiny tweaks can lead to big changes. So this is two minutes. Two minutes, two minutes, two minutes. Before you go into the next stressful evaluative situation, for two minutes, try doing this, in the elevator, in a bathroom stall, at your desk behind closed doors. That's what you want to do. Configure your brain to cope the best in that situation. Get your testosterone up. Get your cortisol down. Don't leave that situation feeling like, oh, I didn't show them who I am. Leave that situation feeling like, oh, I really feel like I got to say who I am and show who I am.

So I want to ask you first, you know, both to try power posing, and also I want to ask you to share the science, because this is simple. I don't have ego involved in this. (Laughter) Give it away. Share it with people, because the people who can use it the most are the ones with no resources and no technology and no status and no power. Give it to them because they can do it in private. They need their bodies, privacy and two minutes, and it can significantly change the outcomes of their life.

Thank you. (Applause)