



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Facial Palsy

COMMUNICATING WITH CONFIDENCE



Oxford Facial
Palsy Service

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATING WITH CONFIDENCE	3
THE IMPACT OF FACIAL PALSY ON SOCIAL SKILLS	3
Situation: going to a work function	4
NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION (BODY LANGUAGE)	5
Facial expressions	6
Posture	6
Nodding	7
Gesturing	7
Using your voice	7
Eye contact	8
Eye contact exercise	9
Eye contact in a group situation	9
ASSERTIVE VERBAL COMMUNICATION	10
SUMMARY	11

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATING WITH CONFIDENCE

Living with facial palsy can sometimes have an understandable impact on a person's confidence. Changes to appearance, eating, drinking and speech, as well as pain, can all affect a person's confidence when socialising.

On top of managing these changes, people with facial palsy can receive unwelcome comments and questions about their appearance. People may also stare out of curiosity, or not know what to say and so avoid talking to the person altogether. Our guide 'Facial palsy: Comments, questions and staring' discusses ways of managing these challenging situations.

Some people can feel particularly anxious about talking to others, or feel self-conscious when socialising. If this is the case for you, you may find it useful to read the guides 'Facial palsy: Managing anxiety' and, 'Facial Palsy: Building your self-esteem'.

If you were born with facial palsy or have had facial palsy for a long time, you might find that you have already developed your own ways of communicating in a confident way. If that is the case, we hope that this guide can provide you with a few new ideas, to add to your current strategies.

This guide focuses on ways to help you to communicate with confidence when in social situations. It will look at:

- the role of body language
- non-verbal communication
- assertive verbal communication

THE IMPACT OF FACIAL PALSY ON SOCIAL SKILLS

Facial palsy can have an impact on people's social skills for different reasons.

For some people, having facial palsy can make it harder to show other people how they are feeling through facial expression. Some people find it hard to smile, while others might have an effective smile, but feel different or 'not like themselves'. This may make it hard for someone with facial palsy to smile in response to other people. In turn, the person they are talking to may then think that they are not interested in them.

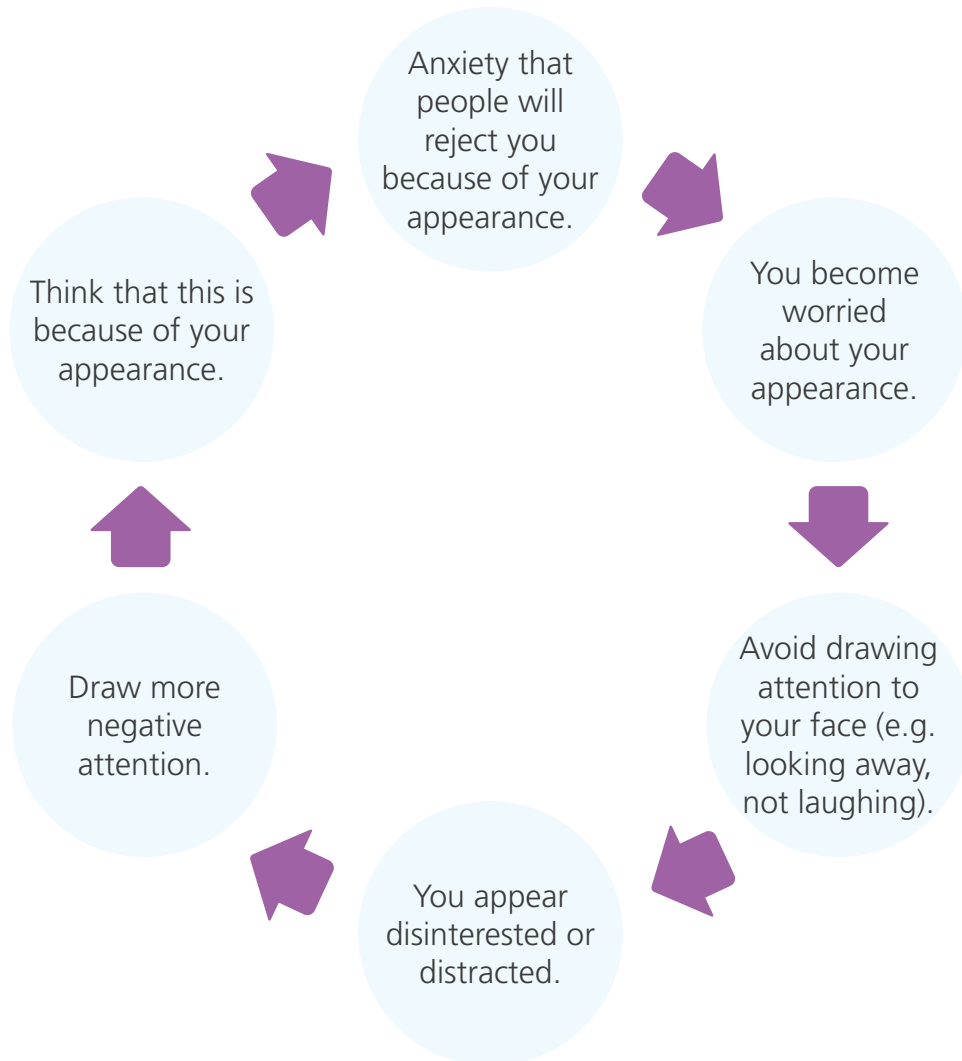
People who have had negative experiences of staring or unkind comments may feel anxious about the way that they look. This can understandably lead them to become worried about their appearance, avoid looking people in the eye or turning their body away. This can be misinterpreted by other people as them being distracted or disinterested.

You might notice that if you behave in this way then other people might be reluctant to talk to you, or that they don't engage with you in as positive a way as before. This may not be because of the way that you look, but because of their interpretation of your behaviour and body language.

This is outlined in the diagram on the next page.

Situation: going to a work function

If you have recently developed facial palsy you probably previously didn't have to think about your social skills, as these were automatic. However, after developing facial palsy it can be useful to think carefully about how you communicate with other people. This guide has some tips and suggestions to help you with this.



Although people can react in a negative way when they meet someone with facial palsy, in some cases the negative reactions of others can be due to the body language and behaviour of someone with facial palsy, rather than their appearance.

If you have recently developed facial palsy, you probably previously didn't have to think about your social skills, as these were automatic. However, after developing facial palsy it can be useful to think carefully about how you communicate with other people. This guide has some tips and suggestions to help you with this.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION (BODY LANGUAGE)

Non-verbal communication describes the way in which someone says something using their body language. People's body language changes when they are feeling nervous, self-conscious or concerned about their appearance.

Below are just some of the changes that people experience.

Tick any that apply to you when you are feeling self-conscious or low in confidence:

- Looking away/making less eye contact
- Laughing or smiling less
- Not starting conversations
- Keeping facial expressions to a minimum
- Keeping arms folded
- Trying not to be the centre of attention
- Staying on the edge of a group
- Disguising part of your face with your hands
- Angling your body away from other people
- Finding it hard to follow a conversation or to know what to say

Although all these types of body language are very common when somebody is not feeling confident or is feeling anxious, they are often unhelpful. One of the exceptions to this would be if your facial therapist has instructed you to keep your facial expressions to a minimum for therapeutic reasons (e.g. to avoid synkinesis, or your nerves rewiring in an unhelpful way in the early stages of facial palsy).

Unfortunately each of these types of body language can give the signal that you are not interested, that you want people to stay away or that you are not someone who is easy to talk to. As well as this, nervous body language can sometimes be distracting and have the unwanted consequence of drawing more attention to you.

This is illustrated by the example of Clive:

Clive, aged 57

Clive has facial palsy due to damage to the facial nerve during an operation for his jaw. It affects the lower part of his face and especially his mouth.

Although Clive does not avoid going out or socialising, he does feel self-conscious about the appearance of his mouth, especially when he is smiling. As a result, he tries to avoid smiling, or covers his mouth with his hand. This behaviour often makes people think that he is not interested in what they are saying. On top of this, his attempts to cover his mouth are often distracting for people, resulting in them spending more time looking at his mouth.

We will shortly look at ways in which you can adapt your body language to help you to communicate in a more confident way, but first let's look at facial expressions in a bit more detail.

Facial expressions

People with facial palsy often say that they are unable to express their emotions in an effective way. That is, they can find it hard to use their facial expressions to let people know how they are feeling. They also often find that this reduces their enjoyment when socialising with people.

Psychological research has shown that a person's facial expression can affect the emotions of the people around them. Psychologists think this is probably because people often automatically copy the expression of the person they are talking to, which in turn changes their own emotions.

For people with facial palsy, it can sometimes be harder to produce a facial expression that shows happiness (e.g. a smile), which means it can be harder to influence the people around them to similarly feel happy.

People with facial palsy often experience misunderstandings from others. For example, you might find that people think you aren't interested in them if you are unable to smile. People with facial palsy have also described worrying that people will think that they are winking at them, when in fact their eye is twitching.

If you have facial palsy on one side of your face, you may still have a 'strong' or unaffected side of your face, which can be used to let other people know how you are feeling. Talk to your facial therapist about how you can best use the 'strong' side of your face to express emotions. Furthermore, you might find that although your mouth is affected, you can still use your eyes to 'smize' (smile with your eyes).

Given that facial palsy can often make it hard to effectively show how you are feeling using your face, it can be helpful to look at other ways in which you can use your body language to communicate confidently and effectively. This can be particularly helpful for people with facial palsy affecting both sides of their face.

Posture

Although we mainly use our faces to convey our emotions, the rest of our body is also really important for letting other people know how we are feeling. When somebody is feeling self-conscious or low in confidence they are likely to sit or stand in a 'closed' way. That is, they might have their arms crossed, their head down and their shoulders and torso slouched.

Everybody has days when they are feeling low in confidence. However, when around new people or in new situation it can be helpful to adopt a confident posture, even if you aren't feeling particularly confident on the inside.

Confident posture includes:

- having your head up
- looking straight ahead
- having your shoulders back
- standing upright
- having your arms uncrossed
- not fidgeting

Nodding

Although people typically use their facial expressions to show they understand what someone is saying (e.g. a small smile to signal agreement or a raise of the eyebrows to show they are surprised), nodding can be used as an effective way to show you are listening and interested.

Gesturing

Using your hands can be a fantastic way of emphasising what you are saying. Try to avoid disguising your face by covering it with your hands, as it can draw more unwanted attention to your face. Try to find a different 'default' or resting position for your hands.

Fidgeting or touching your face can also suggest that you are feeling insecure or nervous. Instead, use your hands in a relaxed way to emphasise your points.

It is important to note that some people with flaccid paralysis (reduced muscle tone) may need to hold their face up in order to be able to speak or drink (especially if they have found taping ineffective at holding their face up). Other people find it helpful to hold their face if they experience twitching or involuntary movements. If this is the case for you, then try to find a way to hold your face so that it looks interested and engaged (e.g. your closed hand resting on your cheek with the index finger pointing upwards).

You might want to experiment with a few different positions in front of the mirror, to see what looks confident and feels comfortable (for example, fingers gently interlocked in front of you or your hand on your face in an interested and engaged manner).

Using your voice

When having a conversation with someone, make sounds (e.g. uh huh, mmm, yes) to let them know that you are listening and to give them cues to show you have understood.

Unless your facial palsy affects your ability to speak, try to find a good balance between speaking too loud or quiet and too slow or fast. Speaking in a clear and even manner can help you to come across as confident.

Think about your tone and intonation. A 'happy' sounding voice can convey a lot of emotion, even if you aren't able to effectively produce that facial expression.

Some people with facial palsy notice that their speech is affected, making it harder for people to understand them.

If your speech is affected it can be helpful to:

- Look straight at people when talking to them
- Tell people that they might have to listen carefully because your speech is not always clear
- Tell people that you are comfortable with them asking you to repeat yourself
- Remember to use your body language to support your speech

Eye contact

Facial palsy can often make it harder for a person to close their eye(s) or move their brow. Some people also find that eye drops make their eyes water and so they regularly have to wipe their eyes. These things can make it difficult to maintain eye contact. Unfortunately, this can make someone look a bit disinterested or like they are not listening. This can often be interpreted negatively by other people.

Common comments about people who have poor eye contact include:

“They look nervous.”

“They lack confidence.”

“They don’t believe in what they are saying.”

“They aren’t interested.”

Over the next few days try to notice if anybody avoids giving you eye contact. How does this make you feel?

It can be helpful to practise giving eye contact in steps:

Step 1: Practice having your head up and looking around you when in a social situation.

Step 2: Look at people’s faces when talking to them (don’t worry if you don’t look them in the eyes at first).

Step 3: Look at the bridge of the person’s nose (this gives the appearance of looking them in the eye, but can feel a bit more comfortable to do).

Step 4: Look the person in the eye.

You might want to practice making eye contact with people who you feel most comfortable with, and then gradually practice it with people that you feel less comfortable with.

Eye contact exercise

Make a list of 6 people that you are likely to talk to this week. Rank them in order of easiest to make eye contact with, with 1 being the easiest to 6 being the hardest. Rate 0-100 on how challenging it is to make eye contact with each person (100 = very challenging).

Practice making eye contact with the easiest person until it rates less than 30 out of 100. Then move on to practicing with the next easiest person, and so on.

You do not have to let the person know you are practicing eye contact with them, although it can sometimes be helpful, so that they can give you some feedback.

	Person's name	How difficult is it to give eye contact (0-100) before practicing with them?	How challenging is it to give eye contact (0-100) after practicing with them?
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			

Eye contact in a group situation

Many people with facial palsy say that they find groups more challenging than one-on-one conversations.

Some people also say that they do not know who to look at when speaking in a group. If you also find this difficult, try the following exercise:

The invisible friend

The next time you find yourself speaking in a group setting, imagine that you have an invisible friend with you. This friend is sitting in the corner of the room, monitoring your eye contact. They have a list of the names of all of the people in the room and every time you are speaking, your friend puts a tick against the name of someone that you make eye contact with. Your aim is to have an equal number of ticks against each person in the room by the end of the gathering.

Doing this exercise will help you to:

- give each person an equal share of your attention
- not stare at one person
- look confident and in control

If you find it difficult to maintain eye contact because your eyes are sore or watering, it can be helpful to explain this to the person that you are talking to.

ASSERTIVE VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Some of the symptoms of facial palsy, such as eye-related issues, fatigue and speech difficulties can have an impact on well-being at work.

For example, certain environmental factors, such as air conditioning, can lead to eye soreness. People recovering with facial palsy following a viral infection may experience fatigue and benefit from a phased-return to work.

If you have a job which involves working with members of the public, you may receive unwanted comments and questions about your appearance and can be helpful to talk to your employer about how they can best support you with this.

Under the Equality Act 2020 *“Employers must make reasonable adjustments to make sure workers with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, aren’t substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs.”*

Sometimes people can find it a bit tricky to ask for adjustments at work. We have therefore made some suggestions of assertive ways to communicate at work. We have outlined different assertiveness techniques, with some examples of how you might use them.

1. Use “I” statements

Work out what you need, want or feel and communicate it directly:

- I feel uncomfortable with you staring at me
- I need to have regular breaks from looking at a screen

2. Show empathy

Let the other person know that you understand their feelings, while also sharing your own wants and needs:

- I know that you are finding it hard to fill the shift rota, but I still need some more time to recover
- I understand that you are disappointed that I can’t work next week, but I have an important hospital appointment

3. Be prepared to escalate

Hopefully your employer will consider your rights. However in a situation when your employer is not following guidelines, it can be helpful to inform them that you are prepared to raise your concerns at a higher level.

Deciding what you are going to say in advance (and rehearsing it) can help you to feel more confident to talk about your facial palsy. Remember, how you say something can be just as important as what you say. Try to follow some of the tips for confident body language, to help you communicate even more assertively and confidently.

SUMMARY

- Having facial palsy can sometimes make it feel more challenging to socialise with other people. This could be because you find it difficult to speak, it is hard to use your face to show other people how you are feeling and/or you are not feeling very confident.
- With a bit of practice, you can use your body language to help you to communicate in a confident way.
- Focus on using your posture, gesture and tone of voice to help you to communicate confidently.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

Authors: Matthew Hotton and Louise Dalton, Clinical Psychologists
March 2025
Review: March 2028
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information



Making a difference across our hospitals

charity@ouh.nhs.uk | 01865 743 444 | hospitalcharity.co.uk

OXFORD HOSPITALS CHARITY (REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 1175809)



**The development of this booklet
was funded by a grant from the
VTCT Foundation**