

# Nonverbal Communication & Safety Cues

## Tip Sheet for Virtual Service Delivery

Understanding your clients' nonverbal communication in virtual settings can help you identify potential safety issues or other concerns. Keep in mind that nonverbal communication varies by culture, age, sex, and social status, so what may be typical for one client could be concerning for another. Consider these cues collectively, as well as any changes to a client's typical communication style, to assess if follow-up is needed, such as a later video call, phone call, or in-person meeting when the client is alone and can answer freely.

### 1. Consider facial expressions

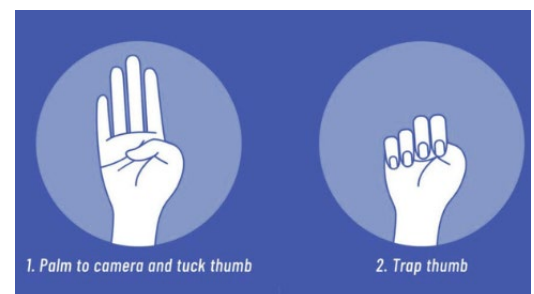
Faces are our first visual encounter with another person in conversation, and they can often show the first signs that something may be wrong. When interacting with the client, consider how their face explains their feelings. Look for facial clues that indicate fear, anxiety, or avoidance.

### 2. Watch gestures

Gestures can give us clues to emotional states or safety concerns. For example, waving communicates a friendly greeting; an anxious or fearful newcomer may wave hello minimally or not at all. Clients may make small gestures to indicate you should stop talking—a clue that someone may be listening, and the client doesn't want them to hear.

Some service providers and clients establish discrete gestures to signal distress, such as the **Signal for Help**.<sup>1</sup> Diagrammed at right, this signal indicates the client needs help but cannot verbalize it at that moment. If a client signals for help, you should avoid sensitive topics and ask the client what they would like to discuss. Continue to check in during the call. If the client has not yet been able to speak freely by the time you end the call, inform your supervisor.

Call again every few hours until the client indicates they can safely talk and you can share appropriate resources for their situation and [safety plan](#). If you are unable to reach the client within 24 hours, initiate your agency's [emergency protocol](#).



### 3. Listen to paraverbals

**Paraverbals** are the non-verbal elements of speech, such as loudness and tone of voice. If a normally cheerful client suddenly becomes monotone, this could signal that something is wrong, and you should try to determine why the client's tone changed. If a client is whispering, it could indicate they are trying to share information they don't want someone else to hear or are fearful of

---

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation. (2020). *Signal for help*. <https://canadianwomen.org/signal-for-help/>

angering someone by speaking too loudly. Like other cues, however, paraverbals can vary widely by culture and individual, so consider what is typical or atypical for your client.

#### 4. Evaluate body language and posture

How a client positions their body during a call can help determine if there are any safety concerns. The following signals might indicate fear, anxiety, or avoidance: slouching, crossing arms, fidgeting or pacing, lip biting, clenching fists, covering face with hands, shrugging shoulders (either in response to someone off camera or in questions related to living conditions or current life), and leaning away from someone else.

#### 5. Review personal space

Personal space in virtual cases can be considered the distance between the client and their device. For example, a client may hold up their phone or sit in front of a laptop, while a family might sit on a couch with their device farther away so everyone is on screen. Consider: Is the client purposefully sitting farther away or even partially off camera? Does the client want to be off camera without explanation? Paying attention to who else is present, on or off camera, is also helpful. Asking “who else is in the room with you today?” may help identify how near others are and whether they are listening in or giving instructions from off screen on how to answer questions.

#### 6. Consider eye gaze

**Eye gaze** is the way in which you look at things, stare, or blink and varies greatly by culture, sex, age, and social status. If a client doesn't look at you or looks off screen before answering any questions, they may be taking cues from someone you cannot see who wishes to control the conversation. If a client stares blankly off into space, there could be a mental health concern.

#### 7. Look at touch

Touch is another form of nonverbal communication. If there are two clients on a call, does one appear to exert control over the other (e.g., a mother puts her arm around her daughter and pulls her closer each time you ask a sensitive question)? Or maybe one client touches the leg of another while the person is speaking, causing them to go silent or change their answer. Paying attention to physical touch can give you clues about how free your client is to express themselves.

#### 8. Check appearance

How a client presents themselves can indicate concerning situations, like abuse or neglect, or mental health issues like depression, anxiety, or even psychosis. If a client appears disheveled or in dirty clothing, or they struggle to complete daily tasks such as routine hygiene, this could be a sign of mental health concerns. If a client has visible injuries, do they have reasonable explanations for how the injuries occurred, or do they avoid explaining? Such visible injuries can be a sign of abuse.

For more details, see Switchboard's [Promoting Client Safety and Security in a Virtual Setting](#).

*The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.*

