

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Proxemics - Too Close for Comfort

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When you are talking with someone, does it make you feel uncomfortable, if they stand to far away or too close? How close is comfortable?

These feelings of discomfort are generated by a dimension of nonverbal communication called **proxemics** — the study of the use of space in social situations. We all have an invisible personal space that extends around us like a bubble. If someone invades this space, it makes us feel very uncomfortable.

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**Although many people cannot tell you  
about norms for face-to-face interactions,  
they respond emotionally to varied distances.**

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**Edward T. Hall\***, an anthropologist, has studied proxemics in many different cultures. Although there are differences between cultures and within each culture, Hall found four typical distances used in face-to-face interactions.

**Personal distance** is the spacing we use when talking to friends. In the United States, this distance is typically 1.5-4 feet. At this distance, you can touch. Where you usually stand within this range can give you some idea of how "close" you are as friends. However — in our culture — if you get closer than 1.5 feet, this will make the other person feel uncomfortable. The other person (or you) will usually retreat to maintain the desired distance. I usually demonstrate this effect, when we cover this topic in my psychology class. I ask a coed to volunteer to come to the front of the class to talk to me. She typically picks the customary distance of 1.5-4 feet. After some conversation, I move within 1.5 feet. If the coed backs away, I try to maintain the closer distance. Several coeds have retreated all the way out of the classroom and into the hall! Others may stand their ground. However, they show their discomfort by averting their eyes, turning their head or body away, or even setting up a barrier by crossing their arms in front of their chest. One coed even put one hand flat on my chest in an attempt to politely push me back to the desired distance!

The closest distance (within 1.5 feet) is called **intimate distance**. Typically, it is reserved for telling secrets, comforting others and lovemaking. Although intimate distance does not need to be sexual, many people interpret it solely as sexual. This is probably what makes many people feel uncomfortable, even though they are being approached in a friendly manner.

**Social distance**, about 4-12 feet apart in our culture is usually used for social gatherings or impersonal business interactions. Within this range, the greater the status difference between the people involved, the greater the physical distance will tend to be when communicating.

**Public distance**, beyond 12 feet, is reserved for formal speeches, lectures and business meetings.



These distances only apply, if the interaction is *face-to-face*. This is because the *psychological* distance is much different than the *physical* distance. It is relatively easy to increase the psychological distance without increasing the physical distance. This is done by averting the eyes, turning the head or turning the body. That is what many of the coeds do in my demonstrations. (If you want to demonstrate this for yourself — if you have the nerve — get into a crowded elevator but don't turn around to face the door!)

Within our culture, there are individual differences for these distances. In contrast to others, women and people from lower socioeconomic groups tend to use slightly closer distances. In contrast, people who are introverted or anxious in interpersonal relations will tend to use greater distances.

There are also differences between cultures. Mexicans, Latin Americans and those who live in the Mediterranean area typically use closer distances than people from the United States. Hall mentioned an example of a person from southern France talking to someone from the United States. The American established the face-to-face distance at about 4 feet. This was too far away for the Frenchman, so he came closer. Like the coeds in my classes, the American tried to maintain the original distance by retreating. Within seconds, both were moving down the hallway — the Frenchman moving forward and the American backing up! Neither person was aware of how much they were communicating with space.

The next time you feel "*too close for comfort*," you will probably have a better understanding of what makes you feel that way.

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\* If you are interested in doing more reading on this topic, two of Hall's books, *The Silent Language* and *The Hidden Dimension*, will give you more information.