

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

CAN'T GET HIM TO TALK? *He may be saying it with his legs*

We've all known men who think that being the strong, silent type means revealing their thoughts only under threat of imminent torture. Even if your partner is not that extreme—even if he is so open that you suspect him of having personally authored the Freedom of Information Act—there are going to be times when he is not able or inclined to tell you something you want to know. When this happens, it's imperative to know how to read his nonverbal signals. In fact, if you understand the language of his body and/or behavior, you'll see that he's giving himself away to you as regularly as he gives his old clothes away to charity.

There are many reasons why your partner might find himself tongue-tied. Perhaps he has something to tell you that he thinks you won't be thrilled to hear—like the fact that he has been offered, and has accepted, the job of career counselor in the local penitentiary, the position having become vacant when its previous holder resigned due to multiple gunshot wounds. Or maybe he can't find the words to tell you he doesn't want to see *A Doll's House* performed in the original Swedish, the tickets for which he knows you waited in line several hours to purchase. Perhaps he's afraid to tell you that he wouldn't be caught dead in the authentic art deco tie you bought him for his birthday, or that he's angry at your turning down, without consulting him, free tickets to a rodeo. Whatever his reasons for remaining silent, his verbal signals, if you know them, will speak loud and clear.

No two individuals have exactly the same signals, of course, but there are certain kinds of behavior and/or body language that you should look for to figure out your mate's particular form of nonverbal expression. One thing he might do is focus his attention on some activity other than speech. The giveaway here is that it will usually be some *mindless* activity. For instance, my friend Annie says she always knows when her lover has something to tell her that he thinks she might not want to hear—like the fact that he has to rearrange their vacation plans in order to attend his second cousin's engagement party halfway across the country. "All of a sudden, he becomes totally absorbed in some stupid activity," says Annie. "If we're eating dinner, he'll start relentlessly twirling the spaghetti on his fork. Or he'll study a single button on his shirt as if it were somehow more interesting than any of the other

buttons. I always see this as a warning signal that there is some atrocious piece of information I have to ferret out pronto, if I don't want to spend my vacation in Winnetka."

Another kind of nonverbal signal involves making some kind of attention-getting noise that does not involve the use of any recognizable form of speech. A case in point: I always know when my lover is angry at me, even if he won't tell me. I always know because the fingers on his right hand start to tap out a message to his right thigh, and this message is as clear-cut as anything the Indians ever beat out on war drums. I know it is a serious signal, and I respond to it by asking a serious question: "What did I do now?" This saves a lot of time, aggravation, and wear on his pants.

If there's a noticeable change in your partner's normal physical behavior, you can be pretty sure it's a signal that something is on his mind, if not on his lips. For example, my friend Susan says that she always knows when something is bothering her husband, because his normally placid behavior becomes positively agitated. "If he's sitting down, he'll start crossing and recrossing his legs as if he were doing aerobics for the kneecaps," she says. "Or he'll shift his weight around obsessively, switching positions so often that you'd think our couch was made of granite. This is always a signal that something is on his mind, usually some trespass on my part. It's as if he has to work himself into a frenzy before he can blurt out that he hates my making fun of his old girlfriends in front of other people. (I defend myself by pointing out that it's not *my* fault if his old girlfriends are laughable. *I* didn't tell him to date a woman who demonstrates instant pizza mix for a living.)"

Probably the most universal nonverbal signals involve the eyes, since, when the mouth is not being used, these are a person's most expressive feature. If your partner doesn't look at you, if he seems to prefer looking at just about anything else in the vicinity, even your mother's photograph, then you can be fairly certain he is taking evasive action. Correspondingly, if he keeps glancing furtively in your direction, making you feel about as comfortable in your own living room as you would in Queen Elizabeth's, then he's probably working up to getting something off his chest.

Tell him to spit it out. Silence is rarely good for a relationship, so it's your duty, in situations like this, to encourage your partner to speak up. Tell him that you would like to help him unburden himself, even if you have to turn him upside down and jiggle him until the words fall out, or squeeze them out of his throat with your bare hands. With encouragement like that, he's bound to loosen up.

by Bette-Jane Raphael