

3 DISTANCE AND SPACE REQUIREMENTS

SPACE REQUIREMENTS

People from different cultures have different space requirements. For example, South Americans and Middle Easterners stand closer when they talk or sit together than North Americans or Asians.

In the United States, people need to have greater distances between them physically than people in many other cultures. Although Americans are often more affectionate and more likely to touch people they know, they have a great need for privacy, especially in the presence of strangers. For example, when Americans enter a bus, doctor's office, or waiting room, they sit at least one chair away from the nearest person if possible. Conversation distance with superiors or those they don't know well is about 3 to 4 feet.* However, intimate conversations may be held as close as 1½ feet apart. Because Americans feel uncomfortable if someone stands closer, they will instinctively move away. Should this happen, don't be offended. Your listener is merely stepping back to his or her normal conversational distance.



*Note that 12 inches = 1 foot; 1 inch = 2.54 centimeters; 1 centimeter = .394 inches.

LET'S SHARE

Answer these questions about your own country to come up with a set of rules about distance in your culture. Then demonstrate the appropriate distance.

1. You wish to carry on a conversation with a person you don't know well. How far apart should you stand from this person? _____
2. You wish to talk intimately with someone you know well. How far apart should you be? _____
3. You are talking to a supervisor or an elder (your employer, a teacher, a clergyman, a government official). How far away should you stand? _____
4. When you enter a bus, a restaurant, a doctor's office, or any waiting room, how close should you sit to the nearest person? _____

Other countries do not have the same "rules" for deciding how close to each other people sit or stand in different situations. Fill in the chart below for your country. The first situation has been filled in for the United States. When you have completed the chart, compare your answers with those on page 160, which are the answers an American would give.

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Distance People Sit or Stand from Each Other</i>	<i>Type of Body Language People Use</i>
Riding on a bus with people you don't know	People try to sit at least one seat from another person and avoid touching. They stand as far apart as possible.	Looking away or out the window, reading, crossing arms, clutching packages
Waiting in a doctor's office		
Waiting in line		
Eating lunch in a restaurant or café		
3. Talking to one's boss or teacher		
5. Talking to friends in a group		
7. Talking to a friend about something personal		

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Distance People Sit or Stand from Each Other</i>	<i>Type of Body Language People Use</i>
3. Talking to a stranger		
9. Talking to a child		