Eye Contact

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Boy sees girl on the verandah opposite his apartment. She is in white, her hair floats in the wind. His heart misses a beat. Then, the most magical thing happens. She sees him. Their eyes lock in a hypnotic, exhilarating trance. The rest, maybe history.

Eye contact is no doubt the most crucial stage of a possible romance. It is the prelude to all the silly, dizziness of being in love. Forget virtual kisses and hugs and amorous chatting on Skype. Nothing can compare with old-fashioned 'seeing each other for the first time'. It is the basis of such a ludicrous notion as love at first sight.



'Eye in Eye' (1894) by Edvard Munch.

Communication gurus keep emphasising the importance of eye contact in grabbing people's attention and creating a good impression. 'Look them in the eye' they insist when being interviewed, when someone is talking to you, when trying to argue a point or giving a talk.

But there are some situations where eye contact is best avoided.

At a roadside restaurant on the highway it would be detrimental to one's health to make eye contact with that curious character with the bloodshot eyes and rippling muscles and the expression of a temperamental Rottweiler. It is best that you make a quick exit from the place and run like the rabbit that would have been hunted down by the rabid Rottweiler.

Similarly, while sweating it out in some suffocating gridlock, making eye contact with beggars or mobile vendors selling pirated books and psychedelic light sticks is not a smart move. Not only will they swarm to you like bees to a honeycomb, they will stand in front of you and continue their refrain until you, in utter frustration, bring out the dough. And once you do that it will be an endless stream of unwanted visitors at your unenviable spot in the choking traffic. Try not to resentfully glare at the people around you who look highly amused by your predicament: You never know what nutjob you are locking eyes with.

Speaking of which, it is highly unlikely that making eye contact with the naked, dreadlocked 'pagla baba', will bring forth any positive results. Instead, you may appear threatening to him even though you are practically paralysed with fear. Looking into his eyes directly may provoke physical assault or embarrassing verbal abuse.

Making eye contact with animals that have sharp teeth and claws, which have the capability of tearing you into uncountable shreds, is also not wise. Thus looking directly at grizzly bears, Bengal tigers and Dingos is out. Vampires too, in case you come across them.

When approaching immigration officers, avoiding eye contact is almost a reflex action. For some inexplicable reason, no matter how foolproof your documents are, immigration officers know how to make you look and feel guilty. They seem suspicious of practically everything -- even your middle name. But sometimes it is better to just look them in the eye and answer the questions. Eye contact makes you seem less like a gold smuggler, drug trafficker, illegal immigrant or absconding terrorist.

Speaking of reflex actions, teenagers do not look their mother in the eye 90 percent of the time. Often this is because mothers have a sixth sense when it comes to telling if their sons and daughters are lying which is often 'necessary' during all the things they have been told not to do -- drinking, dating, smoking, chatting online at ungodly hours, driving without a license, bunking class etc.

Many boys and men avoid eye contact with most females who are not potential love interests because they are shy or mortally afraid of women, especially if they are middle-aged or older or are trying to hide something. Others may just be ill mannered.

Strangers in lifts will painstakingly avoid eye contact, taking an avid interest in people's shoes or texting and gaming on their phones. In a lift, making eye contact and continuing to stare may make you look creepy and a little insane.

Thus the power of eye contact or its avoidance should not be underestimated, which is why absent-mindedly staring into space may bring unwelcome results. You may find some ogling idiot staring right back at you and grinning expectantly assuming you are trying to make eye contact. ■