

Personal Space

Personal space is the area that immediately surrounds a person's body. The person may feel discomfort, anger or fear, if another person encroaches on their personal space. Generally, it is important to avoid invading someone's personal space, although there are exceptions for people you are very close to, such as family members, partners or your children.



Although entering someone's personal space is normally a sign of familiarity or intimacy, living in a modern society sometimes dictates that there are exceptions to this. For example, on a busy bus or train, it would be considered acceptable for people you do not know to sit next to you, although at the same time, they should try not to touch you or lean against you.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall described four levels of social distance that occur in different situations:

- **Intimate distance - 6 to 18 inches (15 to 45 cm)**

This level of physical distance often indicates a close or intimate relationship, such as with close family or a partner. It often occurs during intimate contact such as hugging, whispering, or touching.

- **Personal or friend distance - 1.5 to 4 feet (45cm to 1.2 metres)**

Physical distance at this level usually occurs between people who are

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family members or close friends, or when you are shaking hands with someone.

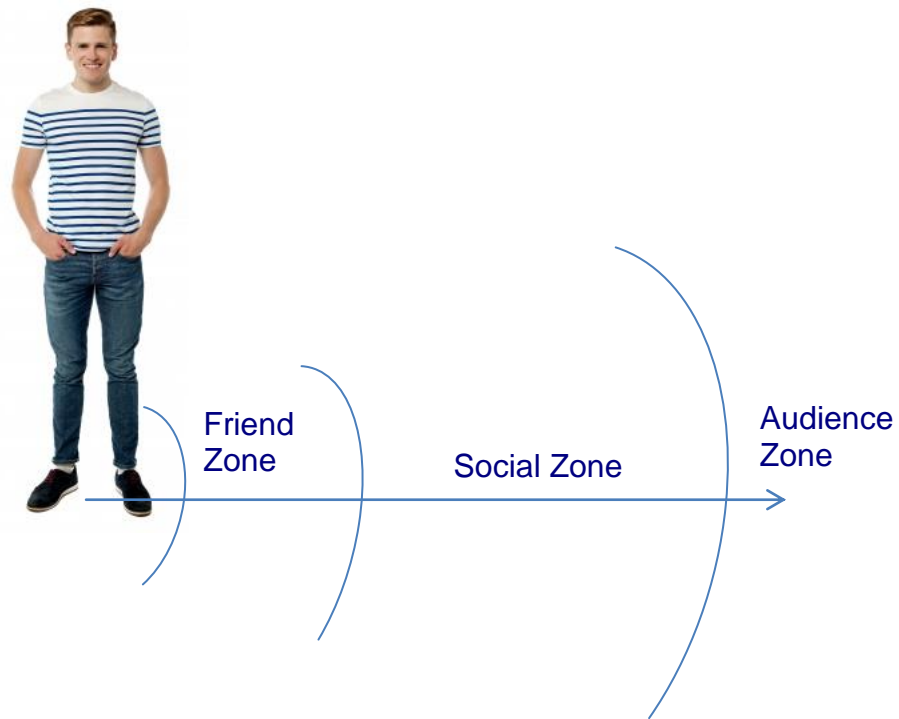
- **Social distance - 4 to 12 feet (1.2 metres to 3.6 metres)**

This distance is generally used with individuals who are acquaintances. Acquaintances are people you know and recognise, but do not have a close relationship with. For example, they would not be someone you consider to be a very close friend. They might be someone you see regularly at a social event, a neighbour you see often, or a work colleague. With someone you know fairly well, such as a colleague you see several times a week, you might feel more comfortable being at the closer end of this distance range. Where you do not know the other person well, such as a neighbour you only see once a month from across the road, a distance of 10 to 12 feet (3 – 3.6 metres) may feel more comfortable.

- **Public or audience distance - 12 to 25 feet (3.6 metres to 7.5 metres)**

This greater distance, is usually used in public speaking or performance situations, where you are in front of an audience. Examples could be performing in a play, or giving a presentation or speech.

The diagrams below illustrate the different levels of personal space, and how close you would expect different people to stand or sit next to each other, depending on the type of relationship that they have and how well they know each other.



It might help to think of the area immediately surrounding people as an imaginary 'bubble' that you need to keep away from, unless you know that you have their permission to enter it: for example, with a partner or very close relative. If you are ever in doubt it is best to stick to the arm's length rule. This means that if you were to imagine your arm held out straight your fingertips would just about reach the person. Don't actually stick your arm out though.



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