



HOW TO
READ
PEOPLE

BETTER

annie

annie Särnblad knows what you're thinking.

No, really. She's an expert in reading and decoding facial expressions and can tell what someone is thinking and feeling—oftentimes before that person has even processed an emotion. It's a scientific skill that she's honed throughout decades of research and practice, one that has earned her the title of "human lie detector."

What started as an intuitive and personal obsession turned into a career as a global speaker and strategic adviser. She works with business executives, entrepreneurs, government officials, elite athletes, lawyers and others to help them better decipher microexpressions and, in turn, be more successful. She leads workshops at conferences, is sought after by Fortune 500 companies and has facilitated high-level negotiations. She can also code the 10,000 muscle combinations within human expression.

Särnblad is in high demand for her abilities, and rightly so. Yet, she would tell you that she never meant for this to be her career. Growing up, she began to develop the skill of reading facial expressions more out of desperation than curiosity.

"My goal with being able to read facial expressions was never anything I had intended to use professionally," Särnblad says. "I had a significant amount of trauma in my childhood and had deep issues with trusting people. I couldn't quite figure out why there were some people who I trusted completely and why other people I knew almost upon first sight were dangerous."

She learned to read people and read them well. Now, she just needed to figure out a way to prove to others what she already intuitively knew.

THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF EXPRESSION

Once Särnblad learned about coding facial expressions, she was hooked. She did much of her training on her own before getting certified—and a lot of that training took place outside of the United States.

Although she's from Boston and lives there now, Särnblad spent 25 of her 52 years living abroad in eight different countries. She started out in banking in Hong Kong before doing management consulting in Sweden and later worked as a strategic adviser throughout Asia. She would take her three kids out in Singapore and live-narrate human interaction in Swedish to them. Living in different countries showed Särnblad that facial expressions are not tied to any one culture. They're universal because they are biological.

"Darwin was the person who really started to categorize and write down the facial expressions," Särnblad says. "He would go from tribe to tribe and started to recognize that each emotion had a corresponding change in blood flow and muscle movement and had a change of facial expression."

Särnblad now speaks five languages well and understands more, but because she lived abroad and spent years of her life not understanding what people were saying, she often relied on facial expressions. "That has helped me in a way that I wouldn't have been able to learn to code facial expressions without because I don't really have a very mathematical mind," she says. "So, once I learned to code them, I had to simplify them and translate them into a language that made sense for my sort of brain."

BY CONNECTING
SCIENCE WITH
EMOTION, STRATEGIC
ADVISER, GLOBAL
SPEAKER AND
'HUMAN LIE DETECTOR'
ANNIE SÄRNBLAD
HAS MADE IT HER LIFE'S
WORK TO DECODE
FACIAL EXPRESSIONS
AND HELP OTHERS
DO THE SAME.

BY **CHRISTIANA
NIELSON STEPHENS**

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She got her certification in Facial Action Coding Systems, developed by Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, and was trained by one of Ekman's students. Although the certification was helpful for categorizing expressions, it wasn't always practical in daily life.

"So I took the field in a very different direction," says Särnblad, who has developed teaching methodologies that work well for a variety of people. "It's really good for teaching management teams and CEOs and people with short attention spans, quite simply."

When she moved back to the U.S. with her family in 2012, her ability to code microexpressions allowed her to jump-start her career in strategic advising.

MICROEXPRESSION AND EMOTION

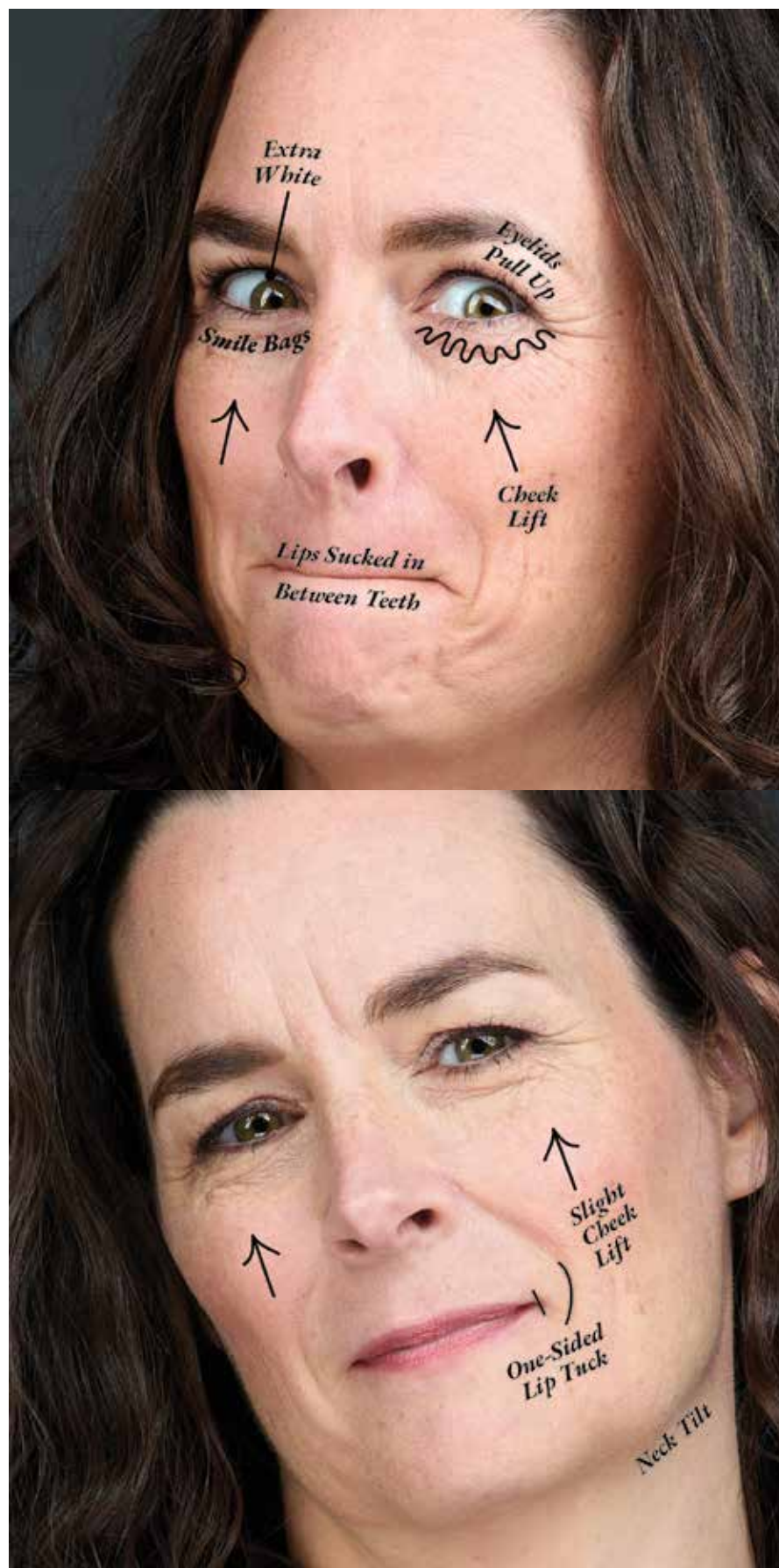
There are macroexpressions, and then there are microexpressions. If macro is the entire puzzle, micro describes a fleeting piece of each emotion. Särnblad says that macro disgust, for example, has three main parts: wrinkles on the nose, deepening of the nasal furrow and pulling of the upper lip. Micro disgust, however, might only be conveyed by a slight twitch on the side of the nose.

"I call it the 'no' face because when you see it in a negotiation and somebody does this, they didn't like that," she says. "Look for the nostril shadows. You can look at all 20 different points and all these different muscle combinations, or you can just see if the nostril shadow is present or not."

A main tenet of microexpressions is that they precede the thought process. Särnblad says you can't stop yourself from showing the microexpression because the muscle movement comes before the moment of cognition. "We need to make the expression to... process the emotion in our brain," she says.

Reading microexpressions also offers opportunities to increase emotional intelligence. Someone might be angry while simultaneously showing signs of sadness in their expression through a puckered chin. If you can see when someone else is struggling, Särnblad says, it's hard to be unkind to that person. If you can read their face, you can read their heart.

"Every interaction is feedback on what you say, what you do and what they want and what they need," she says. "I believe that if you're a good, kind person and you can see how much other people are struggling, it makes it



almost impossible not to try to find kindness and compassion. People kept saying to me, 'You sound like Ted Lasso,' because I really need people to get along and be kinder to each other in corporate situations. I believe that's how we strengthen a company."

DECODING FACIAL EXPRESSIONS IN BUSINESS

Särnblad has devoted much of her time and work to strengthening corporate entities. People will frequently find her through referral or be eagerly waiting for her to step off stage at a workshop or keynote.

"I am often brought in by somebody who says, 'This is Annie. She's different. You can tell her what your real problems are, your real issues. She'll work with you to solve whatever personal and professional problems you have,'" Särnblad says. "Almost all management problems, corporate problems, political problems—they're people problems. If they tell me what their real issues are, I have enough experience in enough countries and enough industries and enough context where my focus is on behavioral patterns and how other people have solved similar problems.... If you have somebody who can collaborate with you without judgment, then you can solve things."

Take mergers and acquisitions, for example. Särnblad trains M&A teams so that when they walk into a meeting, one person might be pitching while the others are watching for microexpressions in the people whose company they are trying to acquire. If someone says their technology will be ready to market within four months but their nasal furrow shows the opposite, the M&A team knows that's not true and that they need to dig further. One of Särnblad's current clients is a multibillion-dollar company—and she's teaching all of their M&A teams how to assess potential acquisitions.

In working with companies, Särnblad has come to understand that a person's problems are rarely just tied to their professional life. Sometimes, she takes on the role of therapist. Clients talk to her about their relationships, friends and drama because the personal pieces often bleed into the professional ones.

"Those same patterns that you're struggling with in your personal relationships, you're also struggling with regarding your colleagues," she says. "If you have difficulty saying 'no' in your personal life, you probably



PAY ATTENTION TO THE PUPILS

Pupil dilation is often overlooked, but it can be one of the most telling signs of emotion when dissecting microexpressions. Here's what Särnblad has to say about pupils:

- Our pupils dilate when we want something.
- It can signify things like desire, arousal, money or an exciting business opportunity.
- Pupils can, at times, be difficult to read due to the fact that they can be affected by medicine or alcohol use.
- Pupils in lighter eyes have a larger starting size.
- If you're in a business pitch, try to gauge how big the other person's pupils are at the beginning of the meeting.
- If you are in a business negotiation, for example, and the other party's pupils dilate when you talk about your plans, go straight to your most expensive pricing.

have difficulty saying 'no' in your professional life, too.... Loneliness also exists in people who are at the top of the pyramid. I don't know any CEOs [who] don't struggle, at least at some point, with [that] loneliness part."

Reading microexpressions, Särnblad says, is the ultimate lesson in listening. "I think that there is not a good leader out there who hasn't come to terms with the understanding that, in order to really succeed in business, you have to learn to listen."

CONNECTION AND PROTECTION

While Särnblad also works with women and kids, most of her clients are men in their 40s, 50s and 60s. That is, in part, why she wrote her book, *Diary of a Human Lie Detector: Facial Expressions in Love, Lust, and Lies*, which came out in September. (She also released a smaller glossary version of her book geared toward her executive clients.) She wanted to connect with an audience apart from her day-to-day—and her book does that by using deeply personal autobiographical stories to teach readers of all ages and walks of life to identify the many facial expressions of human emotions. She also created an online video expression library so that readers can match a microexpression to an emotion and really learn it.

"They get the science to confirm what their gut is telling them in that instant," Särnblad says. "They strengthen their own ability to... protect themselves and to connect with others. And it gives people power who otherwise would be powerless."

Whether Särnblad is advising executives, entrepreneurs and diplomats, or helping children, her work with human expression is always centered on connection and protection.

"It's keeping people safe in a business context and in a personal context, and it's improving connection," she says. "I think most of us want to work on teams that are thriving, that are helpful, that are functioning.... I think if I can help people succeed professionally... in a way that they're also lifting their communities up, they're lifting each other up—and kindness is contagious.... The more we understand what other people are feeling in the moment, the better we can do." ♦

NIELSON STEPHENS IS A WRITER AND EDITOR WHO IS LOOKING FORWARD TO DECODING ALL OF HER HUSBAND'S MICROEXPRESSIONS.