

Lie Detectors

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Watching for potential terrorists should start in airport parking lot, behavioural experts say

By Katie Daubs Toronto Star

A full body scan may reveal a bomb tied to an ankle, but the space between the fingers could determine a terrorist's state of mind.

Joe Navarro, an ex-FBI agent, says there is no "Pinocchio effect" when looking for deceit.

"Our bodies tell us we're either comfortable or uncomfortable and when people lie you see displays of discomfort," he said.

Navarro, who teaches non-verbal communication to poker players, says when a person lacks confidence, the fingers that normally rest apart, tend to come together.

Detecting these kinds of nervous clues may soon be the norm at Canadian airports. The federal government announced Tuesday it will soon accept bids for a company to design a behaviour observation screening program for Canadian airports. The new layer of security will focus on recognizing irregular and suspicious behaviour.

But Navarro said a problem in examining small clues is that compressed lips, cracked voice and increased blinking can occur with honest people under stress. Flight cancellations, unruly children and surly airline staff could lead to an airport filled with false positives.

The ideal model, many experts say, is the Israeli one, where travellers are asked seemingly innocuous questions to determine if further screening is needed. In addition, behavioural specialists observe travellers from the time they arrive in the parking lot.

Rafi Sela, the president of AR Challenges, a global transportation security firm based in Israel, said trained observers at the Tel Aviv airport are senior university students.

"It's a part-time job instead of McDonald's," he said.

Sela said employees are tested all the time with the terrorism equivalent of the secret shopper. "We have actors who we constantly send out to the airport to act strange and give out signals," he said.

Sela didn't want to disclose the strange behaviour employees look for but explained that in an air-conditioned terminal, a person sweating profusely is one to watch.

"It doesn't mean you're a terrorist but it signals there is a problem and we should talk to you," he said.

Navarro, who is surprised more airports haven't adopted the Israeli model, said clues can range from a suddenly shifted foot to the absence of a smile.

"In the history of mankind, there has never been a happy terrorist," he said, noting that post-facto scans of crowds before the attempted assassinations of former U.S. president Ronald Reagan and former Alabama governor George Wallace revealed a stony faced person in a crowd of happy people.

"It is almost impossible to wear a mask of happiness when you're going to blow something up," he said.

Another sign is anxious, repetitive behaviour. Navarro said people who hide explosives often will incessantly fidget with a briefcase.

Paul Ekman, a psychologist who has studied deceit for decades, and is the inspiration for Lie to Me, a Fox TV show about a genius who helps police detect lies using psychology, said the key is in the face.

Ekman calls these clues "microexpressions," an involuntary flicker of a facial feature when a person is trying not to reveal their true feelings. They last for 1/25th of a second and most people don't notice them.

Navarro said governments have been reluctant to dedicate resources to this kind of observational training - and that's dangerous.

"When we rely on machines, the individual loses the ability to observe acutely," he said.

A Transport Canada spokesman said the government will soon post a request for a proposal for the program, but an estimated cost for an actual program is far off.

Former RCMP officer and security analyst Chris Mathers doesn't think the Canadian traveller is ready to absorb the costs of employing university graduates.

"Right now we have security guards. You'd need some pretty astute people to do that. This is an inexact science. It's very difficult," he said.