

The Power of Touch

January 1, 2024

It is the start of another year! It's time to set those resolutions for self-care. A simple but often overlooked and important need for our overall well-being is the need for touch. During COVID-19, many people unfortunately had the direct experience of isolation. Phone and Zoom calls helped with connecting and visually seeing others, yet most people still felt unsatisfied not being in another's actual company. The missing piece was physical contact.

How do we know that touch is so important? Our desire for touch is hard-wired within us and starts right at birth. Babies can be vocal about letting their caregivers know they need to be held. This need is recognized in Neonatal ICUs, which include skin-to-skin contact with parents whenever possible.

In 1965, Harlow & Harlow published a study on baby monkeys. They offered baby monkeys substitute mothers that were soft and cuddly and also monkey mothers made of wire which were a source of milk. They found that the baby monkeys would spend most of the time with the cuddly mothers, often only going to the wire mothers for food. Their conclusions from their studies were that we need food to survive, but apparently, it is touch that sustains us.

In other research published in 1997 (Carlson & Earls), children in understaffed orphanages in Romania were studied. Because of the understaffing, these children were touch deprived. The researchers found that all the children had lower cortisol and growth development for their age group.

The science behind our need for touch concerns our hormone system. The skin is our largest organ and sends both good and bad touch sensations to our brains. An example of bad touch can be quite simple, such as "Ouch!" the stove is hot; take your hand off it. Good touch sensations, however, release oxytocin, the feel-good hormone, into your system. As discussed in several other blogs, the benefits of oxytocin are many. Oxytocin reduces pain, anxiety, stress, and blood pressure. All positive actions.

So, what are the best ways to ensure you are not touch-deprived, especially if you live alone? One of the most effective ways is massage. Massage also offers additional health benefits, such as increased blood circulation and easing of muscle tensions and pain. If massage is not an option, a simple hug can do wonders. Hugging still releases oxytocin and is an easy way of expressing affection. For those who find emotions difficult to convey, no words are needed. Hugs validate a positive connection between two people and share support and empathy. Hugs do, however, need to be consensual, and if you do not know a person well, always ask permission first. Some people have experienced traumas that make hugging uncomfortable.

Lastly, having your scalp massaged during a shampoo can effectively address one's touch quota.

"There is power in touch that words can not convey. It can heal wounds, provide comfort, and convey love." - Unknown

"Everybody needs a hug. It changes your metabolism." - Leo Buscaglia

"No other form of communication is as universally understood as touch. The compassionate touch of a hand or a reassuring hug can take away our fears, soothe our anxieties, and fill the emptiness of being lonely." - Randi G. Fine

"To touch is to give life." - Michelangelo

"Of all the gifts we can give to people, the gift of touch is one of the most priceless. Through our hands we convey a kind of radiance. A warmth seeps out from our inner fire, a wrap for someone's chill, a light for another's dark." - Jan Phillips

"A hug is like a boomerang- you get it back right away." - Bil Keane

Michael Pollan

"Older people shouldn't eat health food, they need all the preservatives they can get." - Robert Orben