

Touching and being touched

By Annie Gottlieb

Do we suffer from a deficiency of an essential nutrient- touch?

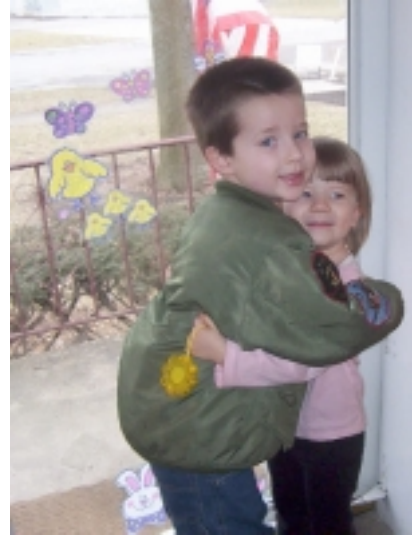
Our need for touching is for “reassurance” or “to soothe”. All of us need frequent, loving physical contact with other human beings- cuddling, snuggling, stroking, hugging, holding hands, walking arm in arm, arms around each other’s shoulders, arms around each others waists. Most of us probably don’t get enough of it. Touch is our basic means of communication. Monkeys and chimpanzees enjoy rough and tumble play. They cling for “reassurance”.

We often chose to use symbolic language in place of touch.

We chose to say “hello”, instead of hugging.

We throw an insult instead of a punch, and we have a political argument in place of a wrestling match.

The use of symbolic language can prevent our sexuality from being inappropriately aroused, but it can also rob us of the basic proof of existence and love that our bodies depend on.



There is an increasing amount of medical evidence that touch is essential for our physical and emotional health, and that the taboos against touching that are imposed on people in our society may be a major cause of stress, depression, anxiety and illness. Scientists now believe that the human need for touch goes back to life’s very beginnings- the experience of touch. The baby’s first impressions are through the language of touch- it tells him that he is loved, and leaves an indelible impression on him.

The soothing stimulation of touch is as necessary to the development of an infant’s body and brain as a mother’s milk.

To deprive babies of touch is a kind of starvation, which can stunt and even kill them. Dr. René Spitz¹, discovered that the over-worked staff at “institutions” in America provided good food, clean cribs and medical care, but didn’t take the time to hold or fondle the babies. Quite simply and brutally, babies there died from lack of loving touch.

Infants who survive severe tactile neglect show signs of a very real an physical malnutrition, called marasmns (from the Greek word for “wasting away”.) They are undersized, listless, emotionally withdrawn and retarded in their mental and physical development.

¹ A professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver, circa 1945

We human beings are so complex, and susceptible to so many influences as we are growing up, that it is hard to separate touch deprivation from other causes of emotional disturbance.

But we do know that touch can be used lovingly as a therapeutic tool to get through to troubled people who are otherwise unreachable, and can go a long way towards healing their emotional wounds.

A recent episode of a Nova public television science program, “A touch of sensitivity”, showed how violently disturbed teenagers in a special residential unit responded dramatically to “continuous, and various kinds of tactile contact” with staff, and each other- as if touch was what they had needed all along.

Touching can convey many positive messages that are not sexual. If you visit a “contact” culture like Mexico, Egypt, Russia or France you see men embracing, and women walking hand in hand. If you are briefly accepted into the life of that country, you will experience being touched in a calm, warm, casual, almost unconscious way which is at first surprising, then soothing. When our bodies are in contact with a friend, a lover, even a pet- our heartbeat slows down.



We don't know for sure what role touch deprivation plays in causing tension and stress-related illnesses like high blood pressure, ulcers, heart disease and cancer, but research suggests that touch can reduce stress and tension, and that sick people who are touched have a better chance of getting well.

James Lynch² observes the positive influence of touch on the heart rate and rhythm of patients in an intensive care unit, and nurse Patricia Heidt discovered that five-minute touch “treatments” given by a nurse seemed to lower the anxiety levels of hospital patients admitted with suspected heart attacks.

Heidt also studied patients who recovered from cancer for her PhD thesis, and discovered that the individuals who got better had pets. They could touch their pets almost unconsciously. Holistic cancer therapists now include massage and “the laying on of hands” as an important part of their healing regime. But we shouldn't have to get sick to receive the touching we need, so next time you feel a surge of affection for a friend, don't hold it back with a smile, say it with touch.

² Director of the psychological clinic at Baltimore's university of Maryland School of Medicine, and author of “The Broken Heart”- The Medical Consequences of Loneliness (Basic Books 1979)