



The Therapeutic Nature of Loving Touch

Mark Tyrrell

When was the last time something 'touched' you? Do you know someone who has 'the common touch'? And isn't it nice when you experience 'the personal touch'?

Physical contact is so important to human beings that it is hardwired into our language, but these days we may be 'out of touch' with just how central a need this is. Here Mark Tyrrell takes a look at what the research says about touch – including one startling finding that lack of human touch can actually kill!

Science Studies Touch

The scientific study of touch began by accident back in the 1920's when a researcher Fredrick Hammett removed certain vital glands from rats. To his amazement some of the rats survived the procedure. Even more surprisingly, most of the rats who survived came from a colony which had been regularly petted by their owners. These rats were less timid, apprehensive and highly strung than the less handled rats. The petted rats were six times more likely to survive the operation than non-handled rats.

Loved babies

In the 1940's a doctor, Fritz Talbot, visited a children's clinic in Dseldorf. The wards were neat and tidy, but something caught his attention. He noticed an old, rather plump woman carrying a sickly looking baby on her hip. He asked the medical director who this woman was. 'Oh, she's old Anna', came the reply. 'When we have exhausted all medical possibilities for a baby we give it to her to hold and stroke. She always seems to be successful!'

This observation and others led to big changes in the way some 'foundling' institutions were run. Bellevue hospital in New York instituted a new policy: every baby was to be picked up, held, touched, gentled and mothered several times a day. The death rate for infants plummeted to less than 10%. A vital human need had been discovered; touch.

Premature babies and touch

For many years premature infants were touched only minimally to minimise the risk of infection. It also avoided arousing the infant and putting undue strain on the heart and lungs. However premature babies need to be touched just like other babies. Touch comforts, increases weight and ultimately decreases medical costs.

In one study, underweight premature babies received special attention. For ten days the infants were given three fifteen minute massages. Warm gentle hands lightly stroked the babies from head to foot and gently exercised the arms and legs. Weight gain is a critical factor in the survival of a premature baby and even though the touched babies consumed the same number of calories as the untouched babies they gained on average 50% more weight per day.

In addition, the stimulated babies had more efficient metabolisms and were able to go home on average six days earlier. Up to a year later they had maintained their growth advantage and had better mental and physical abilities. And all from ten days of therapeutic touch.

Touch not just for kids

Astounding as this is, touch is vital in adults as well as infants. A caring touch or even an accidental brush it seems can lift our spirits. In one study people who had spent no longer than fifteen minutes in a library were asked by researchers how they rated their enjoyment of their time in the library. People who had brushed hands 'accidentally', with the planted librarian reported a more enjoyable time. Presumably the touch would have been subliminal.

Standoffishness - what is it with the English?

How much we touch is partly driven by our cultural and family backgrounds. In the 1960's psychologist Sidney Jourard roamed cafés in the US, England, France and Puerto Rico observing couples for a minimum of one hour. He tallied up the number of touches between couples in these various countries. He found that an average couple in Puerto Rico touched 180 times in one hour, in France it was 120, in the USA it was twice and in good old England the couples never touched! Perhaps things have changed since.

A great excuse for a massage

So, if you don't have someone close and affectionate in your life what then? Well it seems that having regular massage can also offer advantages. People report feeling more relaxed and alert, happier and more comfortable after receiving a massage. If you are relaxed and have been touched tenderly you'll have more spare capacity to work and live more effectively. So massage is not self indulgence then!

We may even get benefits from imagining a loving hug. One public speaker friend of mine imagines hugging his young daughter before commencing large presentations. He swears by this, saying that it gives him confidence and comfort.

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