

TOUCH—Why It's So Important!

Dustin Fox

I remember when my father returned from WWII in 1946. I was three years old and my mother took a picture of him holding me. It was the only time my father ever touched me in a positive way. I wasn't deprived of touch as a child because my mother and my two aunts, army nurses, made sure that I not only received touch, but understood how important it was to feel it.

In 1948, my mother put me on a stool and let me massage the shampoo into the hair of the customers in her salon. Today, as a practicing massage therapist, I am blessed to have the ability to offer my techniques of healing touch. I define "appropriate touch" as touch that is given with good and selfless intent. My life's experiences have taught me there is nothing quite like touch for enhancing one's health and well-being. Here's why!

There are few experiences more pleasurable than to receive the unconditional and caring touch of another. When we feel this, we want to relax. From the moment we are born, we are touched and nurtured by parents who make us feel warm and safe. We are physically and emotionally designed for this. Without touch, we can feel physically and emotionally neglected and isolated.

What are the implications of a culture that instills a "can't touch policy"? What if touch can only be provided by licensed or state-approved professionals, or if it is restricted only to our private and intimate relationships, where it is



often sexualized? Is this primal need being fulfilled enough for each of us and for our children? Do cell phones and computers allow us to "be in touch" without really touching? How can "virtual" or "fantasy" touching possibly fulfill that need? It obviously can't.

While doing massage at a fundraiser a couple of years ago, I noticed that there were three young girls who were sitting side-by-side texting furiously. I asked them who they were talking to and their answer was "each other"! What ever happened to just talking? Are we so "out of touch" that we don't communicate person-to-person anymore? Are we becoming a "touchless society"? If so, how sad (and dangerous) is that? What's this fear of touching all about? Can we get back to the common sense approach of caring through appropriate touch?

What Touch Is

Though touch is not in itself an emotion, the sensory elements of touch do induce potent feelings. A hand on the shoulder placed with loving intent on someone who is in distress produces a welcome comfort. The feeling and energy that we have within us truly is transmitted and

amplified through touch. We know intuitively whether touch is caring or threatening. Yet the interpretation and reaction to someone's touch is often colored by prior conditioning and touch experiences. (The image of the poor dog who was beaten as a puppy and who now shrinks from touch comes to mind.)

Yet, touch with the appropriate intent builds trust and closeness. It encourages communication and nurtures intimacy. Being touched in a good way can allow a person to feel worthy physically and psychologically. Touch essentially nourishes our self-esteem. As infants, it's primarily through touch that we explore, discover, and make sense of our world. The unconditionally loving touch of our caregivers is essential to our healing and growth. Studies show that babies who receive regular massage develop faster and are in better health. When we feel loved as a result of an abundance of appropriate touch, we develop our in-built sense of safety and stability, no matter what slings and arrows get hurled at us in any given day.

How Important Is Touch?

It's crucial and vital! According to J. Lionel Taylor in *The Stages of Human Life* (1921),

“Touch is as powerful in healing the physiology as medical science. The most important sense in our body is our touch sense. It gives us our knowledge of depth thickness and form. We feel, we love and hate, we are touchy and are touched through our skin.”

When a baby cries, its primary need is to be picked up, rocked, stroked and soothed, and it is our first instinct to do so. When you bang your head, your instinct is rub it and soothe it. In everyday language, we often hear: “he rubbed me the wrong way,” “he is thick-skinned; she is thin-skinned,” “they have the personal touch,” “we can’t put our finger on it,” and maybe the most telling of all we say, “please keep in touch,” even when we mean to write or to phone.

Touch in the 21st Century

Many of us are fortunate to be in a loving intimate relationship with a partner, where touch is a given. However, for those of us not in relationship, or where our primary relationship has become non-intimate and distant, touch can be elusive. Some people will attempt to compensate for this lack by going to the hairdresser; others will resort to comfort foods, drink or contact sports; others just “get along without,” hoping the cause of their isolation will be resolved over time.

How we touch today shows that as a society we are troubled and “touch-starved.” In dysfunctional relationships, touch can be used almost like a currency, given only when certain conditions are met, or given without real feeling and thus it becomes unwelcomed. Healthcare providers will remain painstakingly clinical in their applica-

tions, avoiding any impression of inappropriate touch, even if it is detrimental to the desired outcome. Other caregivers are simply “burned out” and don’t want any contact. Overcrowding and stress often creates an atmosphere of “don’t touch me.” The image that comes to mind is how people will avoid all eye contact (never mind physical contact) on the crowded sidewalks of Manhattan or any large city.

What if everyone became an emotional island? What if you couldn’t physically interact with anyone in a positive way? All too often, when we encounter touch in the media, it is in the context of abuse or violence. Too many of us, especially women, have a history of receiving the wrong type of touch—the statistic is that an alarming 8 out of 10 women will receive abuse, physical and/or

emotional, in their lifetime! We may go out of our way to ignore or deny the need for caring touch, and yet our bodies remain imprinted with this basic need. Are we destined to live with the consequences of reduced well-being, fear and suspicion, depression, insecurity, and mental illness?

According to a report from the CDC, the use of antidepressants has risen over 400% since 1988. Could this be in part due to our lack of appropriate touch? We all must guard ourselves and our children from the inappropriate varieties of touch, which can make us ill, both physically and emotionally, but we must find ways to give and access the nourishing and wholesome kind of touch, which is considered by many to be the staff of life itself.

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What Happens When We're Touch Deprived?

Touch deprivation severely affects sleep necessary for the conservation and regeneration of energy. In studies on separations of young children from their mothers, sleep was always affected. The time children required to fall asleep was longer, and night waking was more frequent. In several studies, a suppressed immune response was noted following the separation of monkeys from their primate mothers, resulting in less antibody production and killer-cell activity. Upon reunion with their mothers, immune activity returned.

Studies on touch deprivation among preschool children separated from their mothers noted depression and more frequent illness. Diarrhea and constipation resulted due to poor diet, also a lack of attention to personal hygiene. This is the same for adults deprived of appropriate touch. In one study, 26 adults with migraine headaches were assigned to a massage-therapy group. They received 30-minute massages twice weekly for 5 consecutive weeks. They reported less distress and pain, more days free of headaches, fewer sleep disturbances, less need for analgesics, and increased serotonin levels.

How Can We "Stay in Touch"?

A sincere and warm handshake expresses how happy we are to meet someone and a hug indicates the same thing even better. Both are considered appropriate based on one's intent. If you have a pet, doesn't it make you feel better to touch and be touched by them? And do you observe how the animal appreciates and anticipates your touch?

Studies indicate that when we touch our pets, our blood pressure and breathing become normalized.

Our pets will always provide an outlet for unconditional giving and receiving of touch. Those of us who understand this basic human need want to provide it for our fellow man and there are always meaningful ways to do so. I encourage you to never miss an opportunity to express love, kindness and compassion through some manner of appropriate touch.

I hope this writing has provided you with greater understanding of the value of touch and helps you more closely examine the intentions behind your own use of touch. In part 2, we will delve into touch through the elements of massage. ■

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