

***“Touch is the first language we speak.”***

- **Stephen Gaskin**

This quote is a fact you've probably never thought about. Babies can't talk for quite a while, but they constantly communicate through touch. They also can't understand the things we say to them, but they can understand the power and importance of touch. The best thing about touch is that it always tells the truth. You can't fake a touch and it often speaks louder than words. As we emerge from this pandemic, where we were kept from touching each other for much too long, please make an effort to reach out and touch someone you care about. It'll do you both a world of good. Keep reading to learn more about the importance of touch.

## **The Power of Touch**



Admit it. There's nothing better at the end of a long day or when we're feeling blue than a hug. Somehow, it breathes new life into us when our energy is depleted or when our hearts are aching. We all need physical touch and when we don't get it, we suffer....physically and emotionally. Did you know that there are about 5 MILLION touch receptors in our skin, 3,000 of which are in a single fingertip? No wonder it feels so good when we experience it. Most of us are touch-deprived and it's imperative that we take steps to change that sad fact.

The instant we enter into this world, we're introduced to the power of touch. Our first official touch is that of the doctor (or nurse or midwife) who delivers us. The second is usually that of our mother, when we're handed to her after the cord that gave us life for nine months is cut and we take our first breath of air. From that moment on, touch is paramount to our very existence. Think about the crying baby whose tears stop as soon as someone picks it up. But what happens as we get older? Does touch become any less important? The answer is a resounding NO. It's important from the instant we're born until the moment we die.

I'm half Italian, so I'm pretty "touchy". If I'm talking to someone with whom I feel comfortable, I'll probably touch him or her at some point during the conversation. However, I try to be sensitive to people's personal "space bubble", because I definitely have one. I certainly don't want people I don't know invading my bubble.

If we could classify touch as its own language, perhaps we'd be able to figure it out and understand how to use or interpret it. Many of us have this skill, but we end up taking it for granted. Most people, either consciously or unconsciously, underestimate their ability to communicate through touch. But at times, touch may actually be more versatile than our voices or facial expressions. It's interesting that with a voice or an expression, we can easily identify one or two signals, either positive or negative, and no one would ever question what's being communicated. For example, when we're happy, we smile. When we're sad, our eyes may fill with tears. When we're mad, we may raise our voice. My point is, it's obvious how we're feeling.

For those of you who have read the book, *“The 5 Love Languages”* by Gary Chapman, you know that one of those five languages is touch. Falling in love is easy. Staying in love is the challenge. But if you know how to cultivate your partner's love language, it will help your relationship flourish. If his love language is touch and you give him gifts, he won't be satisfied and it can and will ultimately hurt your relationship. But while touch may be someone's love language, it's critical for all of us to experience touch on at least a somewhat regular basis.

Touch can communicate many things. It's all in the way we do it. A hug when you're greeting a long-time friend is completely different than the hug we give someone who's just lost someone they love. After losing my dad, my brother and the man I loved, the hugs I received (and desperately needed), provided me with comfort, sympathy and even strength. Sometimes it's even just the simple act of taking someone's hand and holding it that's an important form of touch. My best friend holding my hand at my dad's funeral gave me more strength than she probably knew at the time.....until she lost her mom and I did the same for her, squeezing her hand into mine, hoping I was giving her the strength and comfort she had given to me.

Some recent studies found that seemingly insignificant touches yield bigger tips for waitresses, more spending by shoppers if they're touched by a store greeter and more assistance from strangers if a touch accompanies a request for help. What makes this so interesting is that the people in the study didn't remember being touched. There was just a feeling of a connection and that they liked the person more, but weren't sure why they felt that way.

Just like there's no good book on how to be the perfect parent, there's also no manual on how to interpret touch. One interesting fact I found while researching this topic is that atheists and agnostics often touch more than people who are more religious. The reason for this seems to most likely be because many religions teach that some kinds of touch are inappropriate or sinful. They must not realize how helpful it can be. In fact, hugs can strengthen the immune system. According to research conducted at the University of North Carolina, women who receive more hugs from their partners have lower heart rates and blood pressure. The gentle pressure hugs place on the sternum and the emotional charge it creates, activates what's known as the Solar Plexus Chakra. This stimulates the thymus gland, which regulates and balances the body's production of white blood cells, which help keep us healthy. Other studies have shown that when we're touched, it can lower the stress hormone cortisol, which helps our overall health. Hugs also increase oxytocin levels in the brain, which enhances a sense of trust and attachment. As oxytocin levels rise, our heart rate decreases, which provides cardiovascular benefits. That can help to explain our inclination to self-touch, which we actually do (often unconsciously) hundreds of times a day as a simple way to calm ourselves. This touching can come in the form of playing with our hair, rubbing our necks or putting lotion on our hands. Evidence seems to support the idea that touching ourselves is VERY effective.

Just how strong is touch's bonding benefit? To find out, a team led by University of Illinois psychologist Michael Kraus tracked physical contact between teammates during NBA games (think about all the chest bumps, high fives and backslaps). The study revealed that the more on-court touching that occurred early in the season, the more successful teams and individuals were by season's end. The effect of touch was independent of salary or performance, eliminating the possibility that players touched more if they were more skilled or better compensated.<sup>1</sup> Krause was surprised by his findings. *"Touch predicted performance across all the NBA teams. Basketball players sometimes don't have time to say an encouraging word to a teammate. Instead, they developed this incredible repertoire of touch to communicate quickly and accurately,"* he explains, adding that touch can likely improve performance across any cooperative context.<sup>2</sup>

I can't talk about touch without mentioning the power of emotional touch. It too can be a wonderful gift. I'll never forget when I was leaving a job and a coworker gave me a giant topographical map of Mount McKinley.....because I'd once mentioned that I wanted to climb our country's largest mountain. Her kind gesture warmed my heart, much like a hug would do. Her thoughtfulness, coupled with the fact she remembered something important to me that I had mentioned merely in passing, truly touched me, but without the physical act of a touch.

As I close this month, please remember one thing. There's so much to be gained from the incredible power of touch. For those of us who have kids away at college and are home alone, it's much harder to find ways to reap the benefits of touch. But it's important to find them and get them. Touching allows us to have (mostly) more positive interactions with people and a much deeper understanding of how we can better connect with those around us. We certainly seem to feel more connected to certain people if they touch us. I truly believe that the person **GIVING** a hug gets just as much benefit as the person **RECEIVING** it. So do yourself and someone you care about a favor and reach out and touch them. I promise that you'll both reap its benefits. Remember, people require human touch to thrive. Have a wonderful month.

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<sup>1</sup>, <sup>2</sup> Psychology Today, The Power of Touch, By Rick Chillot, published on March 11, 2013