

The Importance of Touching

by Valerie Skiles-Greener



We're all born with a great need for touch. To thrive, newborns must be fed touch as much as food. Studies in orphanages and hospitals repeatedly tell us that infants deprived of skin contact lose weight, become ill and even die. We know that premature babies given periods of touch therapy gain weight faster, cry less, and show more signs of relaxed pulse, respiration rate and muscle tension.

We've seen the bumper stickers asking have you hugged your child today? Children instinctively initiate and seek out touch when they need it. In fact, the absence of this behavior is a red flag for possible neurological damage or a possible history of abuse. As we grow older, we may begin to receive less and less touch. We may hesitate to initiate it ourselves. We may come to associate touch exclusively with sexuality. We forget that we still need touch as much as we did when we were youngsters.

Many of us rationalize that touch isn't important. Part of this may be to cover up hurt from our past if we grew up in families that didn't touch each other. Sometimes it's hard to admit we missed out on such an important human need. To help overcome that thinking consider this interesting study.

Librarians were instructed alternately to touch and not touch the hands of students as they handed back their library cards. Then the students were interviewed. Those who had been touched reported far greater positive feelings about themselves, the library, and the librarians than those who had not

been touched. This occurred even though the touch was fleeting and the students didn't even remember it!

Consider when during the day you are touched or reach out to touch. Do you restrict yourself to handshakes? What kind of hugs are you comfortable with? Do you subscribe to what's been called the all American A-frame? While those in many other part of the world give whole body hugs, we Americans tend to bend forward only from the waist, keeping our lower bodies apart from each other.

If you're a senior, you are in the least touched group in our culture. Part of the blame lies with our culture's emphasis on associating youthful skin with touchable skin, as well as touch being linked with youthful sexuality. Another factor is probably the greater number of people in this age group who live alone. We mostly restrict our touch to a spouse, and then, many times, sadly, this is not the case as well.

But seniors have wonderful opportunities to teach others about the value of touch. Fortunately, as we age, there tends to be a softening of our rigid ideas about things. I know this goes against commonly held views, but we know it's accurate. Seniors are not more stubborn or more stuck in their ways. We know you/we are actually increasingly flexible and willing to adapt new roles!

So ask yourself how you're doing with receiving and giving touch. Consider deliberately touch-



ing others more often and see how it feels. When sitting and talking, reach out occasionally to lightly touch the other's forearm, hand or shoulder. When a friend is tired, offer a shoulder or neck rub. Remember that when we touch, we get the benefit as well.

Observe whether you ever ask for touch. It's OK to say, "I need a hug." Ever had a massage? Not a muscle-ripping one, but a comforting, nurturing, relaxing massage? It is something your body, soul and spirit is craving. Consider a brief foot massage if you're not sure you're comfortable with more. Rubbing of your feet, neck, temples even for a few minutes reduces stress, releases and manufactures endorphins and causes cortisol to subside. For those of you living in senior communities, I bet you'd find many takers if you organized a weekly shoulder massage gathering.

Don't forget your children. Before bed back scratches and soft back rubs and oil foot massages, and plenty of hugs and kisses. They will never forget and always remember, and will pass it on to their own.

Valerie is the founder of the Body Harmony House, a unique, luxury spa located in the heart of Hochatown, Oklahoma, near Beavers Bend State Park, and she is the developer of Intrinsic Assessment Counseling. Body Harmony sessions can be reserved by phone (580-584-6339) or at her website BodyHarmonySession.com.