

The Healing Power of Touch

I love the opportunity to regularly share with you in this column. Sometimes I have no idea what to write about in the next article. There are so many things which impact our physical and mental health. There is even evidence mounting that hugs and physical touch positively impact our health and well being. Who knew that holding our children and kissing their boo-boos really had healing potential?

Over the last few weeks the topic of hugs has come up in many of my conversations and I have not been the one to introduce the topic. Many of these discussions happened outside of therapy. Last week as I was driving across the Island I witnessed two victims of a fender bender embrace one another. It was so nice to see forgiveness shown instead of ugly words.

A few days later one of my friends commented on the thoughtfulness of another patient who offered her a hug in a waiting room. During that same week another friend commented on her appreciation of a co-worker gently rubbing her back and comforting her during a devastating time. I even had a new client ask me for a hug. Since all this happened I want to write about hugs, touch, and healing.

Studies have been done at universities focusing on the psychological effects of physical contact. They have found that loving contact does not just feel good. It also can provide protective benefits to the heart and your blood pressure. In USA Today, psychologist Karen Grewen with the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill was quoted as saying that loving contact before a tough day at work “could carry over and protect you through the day.”

The Touch Research Institute of the University of Miami Medical School has been finding positive outcomes on the power of loving touch too. Caring touch has been found to boost the immune function. The stress hormone cortisol decreases when we experience loving touch. Touch has been found to reduce anxiety and depression symptoms.

There is extensive research related to the health benefits of touch for little ones. I read of one case titled “The Rescuing Hug”, where twins were in separate incubators and one of them nearly died before a nurse put them in the same incubator together. When they were together the fragile twin’s vitals greatly

improved. They continued to sleep together after they got home as well. At last report they were doing great.

The idea of co-sleeping is not new. Some families have chosen to implement a “family bed” as a means to continue nurturing their children. It allows working parents extra cuddle time. Many people even find comfort in allowing their pets to share their beds. There are all kinds of differing medical opinions on co-sleeping. I encourage you to do what works best for your family.

Sadly some people are needlessly starved for innocent physical touch. Many of the handicapped, ill, and elderly are neglected. There is almost a fear associated with touching these special people. Others are deprived because they are single, divorced or widowed. Some have no caring family or friends living nearby.

In today’s busy culture we must be careful to not neglect the importance of touch, especially in our families. Sometimes we need to be intentional about holding and interacting with our children. We need to deliberately take time to rub our loved one’s feet or back rather than just expecting them to use the latest battery operated devices. We need not stay in our rooms like we are on separate planets. Technology can rob us of touch.

God meant for hugs to be gifts. He uses our hands as instruments of healing. Please be aware of the need for caring touches and hugs especially in these difficult times. Just remember to respect one another’s space and ask permission before hugging.