

The Touch Deficit

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Research done across centuries and around the world has proven what most of us realize the first moment someone puts an arm around us, reaches across the table to hold our hand, or envelopes us in a hug: there is great power in a single touch.

It has been proven that touch makes us better communicators, better friends and better people. Touch is vital to our physical and emotional

development and to our overall sense of health and well-being. Touch is at the cornerstone of a healthy relationship with others, and with the self. Touch is, quite simply, remarkable.

The touch deficit

Despite the myriad of benefits touch imparts, there exists a very real touch deficit in Canadian society.

A recent Leger Marketing survey, sponsored by Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion®, found that almost half of all Canadians (44 per cent) feel the need for more touch in their lives.

Despite the fact that a majority of Canadians believe it takes mere seconds to make a meaningful connection through touch, 15 per cent of us go three or more days without touching a single person.

And one in four Canadians spend less than one minute per day engaging in touch (this despite the fact that, on average, we spend over half an hour per day engaging in impersonal, electronic communication).

Why does it matter? Because touch is essential to survival.

The consequences of touch deprivation

There is no better way to demonstrate the importance of touch than by examining what happens when we are deprived of it. Most of us have experienced the sensation of touch deprivation at some point – that need to feel the benefits of touch. But touch deprivation can also have more serious consequences.

In the 19th century, more than half of all infants in their first year of life died from a disease called Marasmus, a Greek word for “wasting away”. Doctors later discovered that this disease was caused by a lack of touch: babies not touched on a regular basis would literally starve themselves to death.

An amazing study completed in the 20th century by touch researcher Ashley Montagu found that children deprived of loving touch suffer the consequences in their bones – small lines of retarded growth, known as Harris lines, appear at the ends of the tibia and the radius. Touch affects us to our very core.

The four touch benefits

The power of touch is felt most strongly in the following four areas:

Biological. Studies on infants and children, in particular, link touch very directly to healthy physical development.

Communicative. There is perhaps no more effective way to communicate than through touch – in fact, science has proven that touch produces a series of neural, glandular, muscular and mental changes that we interpret as emotion. And during a study where subjects were only able to communicate using their hands, the sender was able to communicate five separate emotions: detachment, mothering, fear, anger and playfulness – using only their hands.

Psychological. Touch provides reassurance and comfort and aids in the development of self-identity and self-esteem. We learn through touch. Touch and positive attitudes have been proven to go together: just think about a winning sports team...handshakes and high fives all around when the team wins; detachment and separation when they lose.

Social. Research has linked the quality of touch experiences to competence in interpersonal relationships. The ability to trust others, and understand the needs of others, is directly related to touching – in fact, cultures that give a lot of physical affection to infants are often shown to have lower incidences of violent crime.

Patti Wood is an international speaker and trainer who has been researching, writing and speaking on the health and wellness benefits of touch and body language for over 20 years. Patti Wood's areas of research include first impressions, touch and handshakes. She holds a B.A., master's degree and doctoral coursework in Interpersonal and Organizational Communication with an emphasis in nonverbal communication. Visit Patti Wood online at www.pattiwood.net.

Additional Touch Resource:

The Power of Touch, by Phyllis K. Davis (Hey House Publishers, 1999)