

The Value and Power of Touch

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As long as we are privileged to be alive and walk the face of this earth, we never outlive or lose the need for touch in our lives. It has been said that we all could benefit from a minimum of six to eight hugs per day. Whether we embrace a friend in need, gently touch a crying child or hold a loved one in distress, this non-verbal power of touch is within us all as caring, giving human beings.

Traditions of touch therapies span the centuries in cultures around the world, from the Chinese to the Egyptians. The Greek physician Hippocrates, occasionally called the Father of Medicine, noted that "the physician must be acquainted with many things, but most assuredly in rubbing." Before the advent of modern medicine, massage was the remedy of choice for everything from aching muscles to chronic disease.

Among our five senses - hearing, tasting, seeing, smelling, and touching - it is the latter that incorporates the largest organ of our body, the skin. It is as major an organ as the heart, lungs and kidneys. With approximately seventeen square feet of skin surface, its primary functions are respiration and excretion, along with blood and lymph circulation. Despite this major place in bodily functioning, however, the important role the skin - and therefore touch - in maintaining health has been overlooked in recent history.

*With the advent of the modern age, computers, and the demands of work and home, the pace of life has accelerated and many of us are experiencing sensory overload in the other senses yet a decrease in the critical area of touch. Mr. Ashley Mantagu, author of the famous book *Touching*, spent his life's mission and passion spreading the message to bring touch back into our society.*

Currently, touch therapies are being scientifically researched at the Touch Research Institute, the first research facility in the world devoted solely to the study of touch as it relates to science and medicine. T.R.I. was formally established by director Tiffany Field, Ph.D., of the University of Miami School of Medicine, through a start up grant from Johnson & Johnson. Researchers from Harvard, Duke, Maryland and other universities help to understand touch as it promotes health and contributes to the treatment of disease.

*From the T.R.I. quarterly newsletter, *Touchpoints*, we can see various age groups that are benefited by regularly being touched in a caring, loving way. The "grandparents as volunteers" project involved neglected and abused children in shelters and older people acting as grandparents. The grandparents gave regular, supervised massage to the children. The study showed a twofold benefit, for both the children and the grandparents, but the latter responded more favorably.*

Since the elderly - just as some infants - experience failure-to-thrive because of touch deprivation, (between 5-26%), the mere giving of themselves through massage

during this study produced amazing results. They reported a decrease in depression, hopelessness, negative mood states, anxiety, and physical complaints. Although pet therapy - the having and holding of pets - has been effective, it seems massage therapy could be of more value, especially when giving. This could shed a brighter light on the well-known line from the prayer of St. Francis, "it is in giving that we receive".

The power we all have through touch to reach out and connect to help another can be nurtured and developed over a lifetime, to enrich and enhance our lives and the lives of others.

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