

How Hugs Heal – Have You Had a Hug Today?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › From birth to death, touch is an important part of your emotional and physical health, as it triggers the release of hormones such as dopamine and oxytocin, and reduces the amount of cortisol in your body
- › Health benefits that result from hugs include a reduction in feelings of sadness, lower blood pressure, slowed heart rate, reduced anxiety and increased compassion
- › You may be able to increase the number of hugs and touch you get each day by staying tuned in to others who want hugs, giving hugs and engaging in therapeutic touch activities

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From the time you were born until the day you die, touch is an important part of your emotional and physical health. Infants deprived of touch grow up with developmental and cognitive delays, attachment disorders and a higher risk of serious **infections**.¹ On the other hand, premature infants who are held skin-to-skin exhibit better cognitive skills, are more resilient to stress and have more organized sleep patterns, even 10 years later.²

These early touch-based interventions demonstrate the need for touch in psychological regulation. The benefits of touch don't diminish with age. The late Virginia Satir, psychotherapist and generally acknowledged as a pioneer in family therapy,³ spoke

about the importance of touch and hugs as it relates to a person's emotional health, saying:⁴

"We need 4 hugs a day for survival. We need 8 hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth."

This may represent the minimum and optimum thresholds to generate sufficient oxytocin, a hormone released by your pituitary gland in response to physical touch. The simple act of hugging may not only increase your bond with others but may also boost your physical and emotional health.

The Importance of Touch

In the absence of touch, children become almost unrecognizable, developing personality disorders and other conditions that make it difficult for them to live in society.⁵ Historical reports of children who grew up "feral," or in the wild without the benefit of touch, show they often have difficulty assimilating into a group.

Touch is the primary language to communicate compassion and is fundamental to communication, bonding and health.⁶ It supports the immune system, reduces stress, encourages sleep and has no side effects. It doesn't drain your batteries but recharges you instead.

Western cultures often experience a deficiency in touch. Before he passed in 1974, psychologist Sidney Jourard completed a study in which he measured touch between friends in the U.S., England, France and Puerto Rico.⁷ In England, people didn't touch at all. In the U.S., friends touched up to two times an hour.

This is in deep contrast to friends in France who touched up to 110 times in an hour, or in Puerto Rico where they touched up to 180 times in an hour.

Health Benefits of Oxytocin

Humans are wired so that hugs make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Whether it's a mother-child embrace, a hug from a friend or a squeeze from your significant other, research suggests these touches deliver some real emotional and physical health benefits.⁸

The basis for several of the benefits psychologists associate with hugging is the result of the release of oxytocin. Also called the "love hormone" or "cuddle hormone," it is released from your pituitary gland, triggering a flood of emotions depending upon the environment in which you associate the hormone.⁹

In other words, in cases where the hormone was released during situations that were not pleasant, such as during poor relationships, it can make you less accepting of people. The hormone was first recognized for the role it played in bonding mother and child during pregnancy and nursing.

While **oxytocin** appears to be related to the bond a mother feels with her infant, those interactions also increase the amount of oxytocin secreted by the infant.¹⁰ The bonding experience of oxytocin is not limited to infancy, but also translates into adulthood, triggering feelings of trust and support between people who hug.

These reactions are the result of actions as a neurotransmitter on the emotional center of the brain. It promotes feelings of contentment and may even promote monogamous behavior,¹¹ especially in men who are already bonded to a woman.¹²

The release of oxytocin with hugging triggers feelings of compassion for the other person, a necessary form of connection and support during times of psychological stress or grief. Feelings of intimacy and closeness give you an optimistic sense of where you fit socially and a positive sense of well-being.¹³

Relationship Between Hugs and Cortisol

The release of oxytocin reduces your levels of stress hormone, or cortisol. This reduction in stress, combined with a sense of emotional support, appears to support your immune system and make you less susceptible to the common cold.¹⁴

Research has found your perceived social support and the number of hugs you give and get could predict your susceptibility to developing a cold, finding that hugs could explain 32% of the beneficial effect.¹⁵ Even those who got a cold had less severe symptoms when they had more frequent hugs.

The pressure of a hug may stimulate your thymus gland, responsible for the regulation and balance of your white blood cells,¹⁶ another way in which hugging may support your immune system. This **reduction in cortisol** and perceived stress may also help you stay calm during a stressful event, such as a presentation at work or a medical test. The reduction in stress also lowers your heart rate¹⁷ and blood pressure,¹⁸ which may reduce your potential risk for heart disease.

The reduction of stress may also have a direct response on the prevention of other diseases. The Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine has carried out multiple studies on the significance of touch and found a reduction in pain, lowered glucose levels in children with diabetes and improved immune system in people with cancer.¹⁹

Hugs Each Day May Help Keep Depression at Bay

A hug is also one of the easiest ways to demonstrate appreciation and acknowledge the person you are hugging as important to you. Nearly 55% of all communication is nonverbal,²⁰ so a single gesture of hugging is an excellent method of communicating love and care.

Hugs stimulate your brain to release several other chemicals that affect your mood and emotions. The first, dopamine, is a hormone that evokes pleasure in the brain. Endorphins are also released, helping to reduce pain and feelings of sadness.²¹ According to Debra Castaldo, Ph.D., relationship expert and couples and family therapist:²²

"We also know that hugging our loved ones promotes healthy emotional attachment and intimacy, which is the foundation of a happy, healthy long-term

relationship."

Unfortunately, with age, the number of touches and hugs received often goes down. Seniors who live alone may not experience touch on a daily basis.²³ Affection may make a big difference in the emotional and physical health of seniors. Sharon Farber, Ph.D., commented in Psychology Today:²⁴

"Being touched and touching someone else are fundamental modes of human interaction, and increasingly, many people are seeking out their own professional touchers and body arts teachers – chiropractors, physical therapists, Gestalt therapists, Rolfers, the Alexander-technique and Feldenkrais people, massage therapists, martial arts and T'ai Chi Ch'uan instructors.

And some even wait in physicians' offices for a physical examination for ailments with no organic cause – they wait to be touched."

Hug Evolution – Mindful Hugging

Yogi masters also recognize the health benefits associated with physical touch, specifically with hugging.²⁵ The late Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who made hugging meditation famous, was a global leader whose key teaching is that through mindfulness, people can learn to live in the present moment.²⁶ He believed that a good hug may have life-changing effects on the individual. He wrote about his pursuit of hugging meditation:²⁷

"When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings. Hugging with mindfulness and concentration can bring reconciliation, healing, understanding and much happiness."

Hugging meditation can be practiced with your mother, father, sibling, spouse or even a tree, according to Hanh. The practice begins with the recognition of each other's presence and then an embrace that encompasses three deep breaths. The first breath is designed to help you acknowledge your presence in the present moment.

With the second breath, you become aware of the presence of the other, and with your third breath, you celebrate with gratitude your presence with the other person. Hanh believed that hugging in such a way brings reality into the present moment, and possibly reconciliation. At the same time, this practice releases the other health benefits mentioned above.

Fun Facts About Hugging

Hugs are healthy for your emotional and physical well-being. Even a 10-second hug may give you most of the benefits listed above. Those health benefits may include reduced fatigue, improved heart health and reduced depression.²⁸

Cuddling, a longer form of hugging, with your partner, releases more dopamine and may increase your sexual desire.²⁹ Hugging may also reduce fear of and worry about mortality. One study found that even hugging an inanimate object, like a teddy bear, may reduce these fears.³⁰

The release of oxytocin from hugging may also help reduce social anxiety.³¹ Getting a hug right before going to a party where you don't know anyone may help you feel more confident and social. Researchers found marriages where couples hugged frequently lasted longer than those where they rarely hugged.³²

A national holiday was founded in 1986 to encourage hugging.³³ It has been recognized by the U.S. Copyright Office but is not a public holiday. The purpose is to help people show more emotion in public in a country where this type of display is not common.

Founder Rev. Kevin Zaborney from Michigan encourages people to hug in public and post to social media every January 21 with #NationalHuggingDay. The person who is giving the hug gets as much benefit as the person being hugged, although you may experience greater benefit from hugging someone you trust.

5 Ways to Get Your Hug On

In this short video, Cordero Roman does an inexact social experiment on hugging. Watching the video, you may be able to "feel" the difference between the hugs just from the individuals' experience on film.

It may be difficult to [get hugs](#) each day living in a country where physical touch is not encouraged, or if you live alone. If you put your mind to the task, there may be ways to get healthy touch. These suggestions may feel like they are out of your comfort zone, but you won't enjoy the results unless you take the first step:

- **Teddy bear** – While not as satisfying as hugging another person, hugging an inanimate object may help reduce fear and anxiety.
- **Greetings** – While it may feel strange at first, make it a habit to greet your friends with a hug. Ask before you hug. This may be more difficult between two men. However, unless you step out of your comfort zone and ask, you won't find friends who are looking for the same nonsexual touch contact.
- **Therapeutic touch** – Chiropractors, massage therapists and reiki masters all must touch you to practice their craft, and most understand the health benefits associated with touch. You'll likely not get a massage daily, but it may be something you can work into your monthly schedule.
- **Give one** – You may not get one unless you give one. If you usually do not hug your children, siblings, parents or friends, then it may be up to you to take the first step and initiate a hug.
- **Be mindful** – Some people don't want to hug fearing cold viruses. Others don't want to hug or may be afraid of how another person may interpret the hug. Be mindful of how the other person feels and seek out others who may also want a hug that day. Remind yourself as you meet people, others do need hugs each day. As you look for opportunities, more will appear.

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