

# The Healing Embrace: The Profound Impact of Human Touch – Article Review

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**Abstract:** Human Healing Touch is a technique that utilizes intentional, loving physical touch to enhance emotional and physiological well-being. It is a complementary therapy. Touch as an Intimation of Caring, Connecting, and Safety, it has always been a means to lower the height of stress, anxiety, emotional meltdown, and even physical pain. Touch influences the parasympathetic nervous system that instigates rest; it calms the body and releases oxytocin, the hormone responsible for the perception of comfort and trust. This gentle, non-invasive approach is helpful in nursing and personal care, particularly in fields where vital strength can be low and patients draw strength from the most challenging of times, such as when they are sick, traumatized, or lonely, because of collateral suffering. It provides the caregivers, as well as the patients, a touch of presence and emotional support. It is used within palliative, mental health nursing, and post-operative rehabilitation to help regain emotional homeostasis. Human Healing Touch is a simple yet effective technique that blends compassion and caring to enable people to overcome their emotional breakdown through healing. It was long held in the annals of history that the human touch is a powerful technique of healing and comforting. The physiological and psychological effects of contact have been the subject of increasing research over the last few years, and the role of touch as a facilitator of overall health and well-being has been acknowledged. From physiological and neurological perspectives, this paper explores the mechanics of human touch and the evolution of body-based therapies. It concludes by considering the potential effects of touch deprivation on children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Human Healing Touch, Emotional Breakdown.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Touch is a vitally important part of human contact, and massage is one of the oldest and simplest forms of therapy. In the field of transpersonal psychology, which focuses on transcendent experiences and spirituality in the field of psychology, physical contact is highlighted as an important connection. Touch in the healing of emotional pain is explored in this paper: its theoretical basis, psychological gains, and situational applications. Touch can induce pleasurable emotional responses and emotional regulation. Touch activates brain circuits that release neurochemicals such as oxytocin, which induce feelings of safety, trust, and connection. Touch is a powerful stress and anxiety reducer, contributing to well-being and resiliency in emotionally challenged individuals. Transpersonal psychology therapy clients must understand how touch heals feelings. Human touch remains one of the best ways to communicate nonverbally in a world where digital connections and emotional isolation are the norm. There is no other human touch that has the power to calm, soothe, and heal emotional pain. Those who reach the end of their tether emotionally,

when there is much grieving, anxiety, or despair, can feel isolated and estranged. A reassuring hug, a comforting pat on the back, or a warm hand might work wonders under such circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

## II. THE LANGUAGE OF THERAPEUTIC TOUCH

A descriptive study was conducted by M. Gleeson, F. Timmins on the use of therapeutic touch on older patients in long-term mental health care. Elderly patients in long-term mental health care services suffer from self-care deficits because of impaired cognition that can also influence their needs at higher levels. The nursing care for old people is a necessary personal care with a lot of communication. While the more basic, physiological, and safety needs are crucial for clients in a chronic setting, the higher-level needs still need to be approached. Touch from a nurse is subjectively comforting, warming, and reassuring for clients, although little objective evidence exists that touch provides these benefits.<sup>2</sup>

One Australian study involving eight patients and four nurses (Durkin et al, 2021b), which was carried out across purposively selected clinical areas within an acute hospital setting during 2018/19, explored the giving and receiving of compassion through touch. Touch enabled the patients to experience humanity, which made them feel safe and comfortable; they felt that they met a “real” person in the nurse. Nurses reported that they used both intentional and unintentional touch as part of their care practice to express caring. Touch was used appropriately, in consideration of the patient's wishes and meanings of touch. If larger studies are not yet feasible, these results affirm other non-nursing research data that have been quite clear in the sense that beneficial psychological and physiological effects are associated with consensual touch. Clients of community health nursing, particularly those who had experienced few opportunities for social touching or had prevention of loneliness, have much to gain from exposure to this practice.<sup>3</sup>

It has been found that social touch reduces stress and induces calm in adults. This is related to a reduced psychobiological stress reactivity, related to neurophysiological and endocrine effects following tactile communication. Touch is a social signal of safety that is interpreted as such by the brain, the response being a reduction in neural stress and fear responses via a neural ‘brake’ that involves the inhibition of the amygdala by orbitofrontal and anterior cingulate cortices, which may be defective to some degree in ASD people, or activation of the reward system in which came to get neural reward during approach behavior. The reinforcing effects of the safety signal readily suppress the ordinary aversive system.<sup>4</sup>

Human contact is the first sense to develop and the last to fade away. Language conveys emotion through touch, unlike words, which could be taken the wrong way. A gentle touch can express safety, love, compassion, and understanding. Based on neuroscience findings, physical touch activates the orbitofrontal cortex, a part of the brain engaged in feelings of compassion and reward. We humans have been wanting our physical touch from the very beginning. Babies who are touched and held more often are also more emotionally stable and resilient as adults. Similarly, soothing touch can also help people feel validated and soothed by the simple reminder that they exist and belong during emotional crises.

### III. PHYSICAL CONTACT AND HEALTH IN A NEW META-ANALYTIC CONTEXT

Julian Packheiser of Germany's Social Neuroscience lab at Ruhr University Bochum and his group conducted a so-called meta-analysis to combine existing research on touch and psychological and physiological health (Packheiser and co-authors, 2024). The findings of a meta-analysis are stronger and more reliable than those of a smaller study because the statistics that produced them come from much larger samples. This is because meta-analyses combine studies statistically. The researchers included data from a total of 137 individual studies. Furthermore, in their literature

review, 75 studies were found to be unsuitable for a mathematical synthesis. Results are also very reliable since the study was based on data from more than 13,000 men and women.<sup>5</sup>

### IV. THE SCIENCE OF COMFORT: THE POWER OF TOUCH

Human touch has a power that is deeply seated in our brain and reaches far beyond mere psychology. “When we engage in healthy physical contact, there is an incredible hormonal and physiological shift in our bodies. Oxytocin, the “love hormone” or “cuddle chemical,” is released when we are touched. This powerful hormone inspires feelings of trust, empathy, and connection, and a general sense of peace. It supports the formation of a primal sense of security and the elimination of emotional blockages. Reduction in Cortisol: Touch influences our stress response. Cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone, is significantly lowered by it. The reduced cortisol gives people a break from the confusion of emotional pain, alleviating anxiety and helping to promote relaxation. Endorphin kick: Endorphins, the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators that give feelings of happiness and well-being, can also be triggered by touch. Neurotransmitter regulation: Besides hormones, touch also impacts other vital neurotransmitters (responsible for mood regulation) like dopamine and serotonin. It is also a global physiological response that allows people to regulate their emotions and feel less lonely, and even just generally feel better.”<sup>6</sup>

#### ➤ *In Preterm Infant Development*

Neurobiology of Affect in Preterm Infants. Touch was just one stimulus explored in a study. Recent studies are reviewed everywhere, including emotional touch, C-tactile fibres, and newborn care tactile therapies are discussed in this article. The primary outcome areas of interest selected were neurodevelopmental and physiological outcomes for preterm infants. The benefits of SSC and massage therapy in the neonatal intensive care unit are reviewed. Outcomes: Emotional touch, following activation of tactile C-fibres, increases caregiver-infant bonding, decreases stress, and helps to promote neurodevelopment in preterm infants. The heart rate, breathing, and temperature control get better with Skin-to-Skin Contact (SSC) and Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC), in these new newborns, as do emotionally and job-related aspects of the brain. Conclusions: Preterm newborns in the NICU require effective contact to develop. The incorporation of physical therapy into the care of the newborn with SSC and KMC seems to have an impact that extends beyond the immediate moment of treatment and might improve development in the long run. To optimize infant care, one line of research that needs to be pursued includes affective touches, epigenetic pathways, and optimization of tactile treatments.<sup>7</sup>

#### ➤ *Among Elderly Citizens*

With age, most people experience physical deterioration, chronic illnesses, emotional instability, and social withdrawal. So, there is still a yearning for connection at this point. Therapeutic touch, a holistic and intentional

practice of hands-on healing, can benefit seniors emotionally and physically. The physical and psychological needs of older human beings are considered, and the benefits of therapeutic touch, practiced in nursing and caring, to the quality of life among older people are discussed.

A study of the effects of therapeutic touch on old people. To investigate the effects of TT as compared with mimic touch (MT, placebo) and standard care (SC), a single-blind, pre-post-test, randomized, three-group design was applied. Ninety-five participants were enrolled from seven sites (retirement communities, nursing homes, adult day care, and community senior centers), were stratified by facility of origin, and randomized to one of three groups. Ninety participants fulfilled the procedure. The TT patients experienced significantly reduced pain ( $p < 0.01$ ), higher than in the control groups; the effect size was 0.92. Anxiety in the TT-group was significantly decreased ( $p < 0.01$ ) ( $d = 0.35$ ). Acantholysis and salivary cortisol values did not change much. The current study found that TT is also an effective intervention to decrease self-reported pain and anxiety in older adults.<sup>8</sup>

#### **V. HUMAN HEALING TOUCH ON EMOTIONAL HEALTH BENEFITS**

Think back to the last time a simple touch brightened your day. Whether a friend gave you a reassuring hug or someone put a comforting hand on your shoulder during a hard day, that simple touch probably made a big difference in how you were feeling. Research has indicated that touch induces the release of oxytocin, or the 'cuddle hormone', which is important in building trust, decreasing fear, and relieving stress. This biochemical reaction is only one small part of the complex. Several studies, ranging from those conducted by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine to research conducted by Lucy Shapiro, Ph.D., professor of developmental biology at Stanford University's Stanford School of Medicine, are finding that regular physical contact can result in lower levels of violence, more trust between people, better learning, and team performance as well as stronger immune system functions. Functional MRI scans show, when people receive a compassionate touch, they activate portions of the brain, including the orbitofrontal cortex, which is a key brain region in our reward system as well as a key region in understanding others' mental states. The science of touch's healing power might be the key to bringing this human necessity back into our lives.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of touch goes beyond comfort, making a significant difference in long-term health. Being positively and regularly touched has been associated with a decrease in depressive and anxiety symptomology, less aggression, reduced heart rate and blood pressure, enhanced immune system, better sleep quality, and reduced inflammation in the body. Touch and massage therapies offer promise in relieving symptoms of several health concerns. During cancer treatment, patients use massage to alleviate pain, nausea, and fatigue. Preterm infants also experience improved weight gain and developmental outcomes when receiving skin-to-

skin contact. Incorporating positive touch through everyday activities such as hugs, holding hands, or professional massage may contribute to physical and emotional health.<sup>10</sup>

Human touch is, first and foremost, comforting. In our high-anxiety environment, stress feels like it lurks at every corner, but touch could alleviate our anxieties. With success, it reduces tension and relaxes out the tension. Even hand-holding with a loved one can soothe busy places and restrain our stress response. Touch creates security and trust, necessary for mental health. We are wired to be held and loved, all the way back to our first comfort and care. We feel greater safety and increased connection when we make positive contact. And, speaking of relationships, touch also increases social bonds. Sometimes, speaking without words can communicate empathy, support, and compassion more effectively than spoken language. A touch on the shoulder or a pat on the back can provide comfort and connection among people. Touch also boosts empathy. Positive touch can make people more empathic and improve their ability to read emotions, research shows. Improved emotional intelligence may improve relationships and social functioning.<sup>11</sup>

#### **VI. THE DARK SIDE: THE IMPACT OF TOUCH DEPRIVATION**

In this increasingly digital life that many of us are living, where screens and virtual communication stand in for face-to-face interaction, plenty of people are desperate for physical contact. Tactile insensitivity can lead to anxiety, depression, and stress. In general, social isolation and loneliness, which often go hand in hand with a lack of touch, can be emotionally deleterious. We humans are social creatures: Naturally, we feel lonely and unfulfilled when we are alone. Absence of contact can result in further social disconnection and exacerbate loneliness. Persistently going without touching may make people more prone to sadness and anxiety, according to research. Without good contact, those positive mood-boosting and stress-reducing benefits are lost, rendering us more vulnerable to negative emotions. And touch deprivation can also impose a physical toll. Research has linked touch deprivation to an impaired immune system, inflammation, and high blood pressure. These physical impacts can affect our mental well-being too, which creates a complex relationship between the two.<sup>12</sup>

A study was conducted on social touch deprivation during COVID-19. The present study consists of 1746 participants who completed an online survey investigating personal, friendly, and professional contact experiences under COVID-19 restrictions, their mental health impact, and the impact of touch deprivation on touch cravings. Intimate touch, the most frequent type of contact during the epidemic, was associated with more distress and loneliness under COVID-19 limitations. The contact most sought after at this point is the human touch, even more so if people are experiencing it from a social distance. Results also indicate that anxious individuals wish to have more contact while avoidant individuals wish to have less during this period. The findings indicate that proximity is valuable in times of anxiety and uncertainty.<sup>13</sup>

## VII. TOUCH'S COMPLEXITIES: CULTURAL AND INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS

We must recognize how different touch perception can be from one culture and one person to the next. What is a friendly gesture in one place may be rude in another. Healthy social relationships involve understanding and respecting boundaries about touch. That is not the case in some cultures, where you are supposed to communicate every day. When you greet your friends and acquaintances, it's standard to share a kiss on the cheek or give them a warm hug in Mediterranean and Latin American countries. Contrast that with East Asian cultures that value personal space and eschew shows of love in public. Tactile sensitivities differ quite markedly between cultures. Some people naturally take offence, and love a bit of physicality. Some might not want to touch and stay apart. These variances could be influenced by personality, history, and neurodiversity. Touch sensitivity can be an issue for autistic individuals. For some people, seeking contact makes sense, whereas for others, the contact is too much or just icky. To have inclusive environments and healthy relationships, these differences must be acknowledged and honoured. Touch permission is an additional one that needs to be discussed. Physical boundaries and bodily autonomy have mattered more in the past several years. Consent talk is entering social and therapeutic spaces with more openness.<sup>14</sup>

## VIII. SUMMARY

There is something so wonderfully communicatively powerful behind healing touches that promote good emotional, physical, and mental health. It mitigates stress, anxiety, despair, and loneliness through interaction with others. This method of contact releases oxytocin and reduces cortisol while stimulating the parasympathetic nerve system. Excrescence is oxytocin-inducing and decreases cortisol stimulation and simultaneously causes activation of the parasympathetic nerve system when achieved through soft intentional touch, such as hugging, holding hands, or a therapeutic touch, promoting relaxation and emotional ease. Healing touch has been effective in caring for seniors, in palliative care, and mental health support when words have proved inadequate. It fosters trust, compassion, and a sense of community, which can be helpful in nursing and holistic medicine. Healing touch reflects our longing for connection and care, but it should also be employed safely and with consent. In a high-tech, fast-moving society, healing touch can bring warmth, empathy, and peace to caregiving and our everyday interactions.

## IX. CONCLUSION

There is something truly human that resides in being clutched to someone's presence when having a complete emotional collapse. It is so much more than touch; it is comfort and reassurance, and connection when words can only go so far. Touch helps to calm the nervous system, stimulating the release of calming hormones, oxytocin, and reducing stress-stimulated hormones such as cortisol, dampening high levels of emotions, and helping them feel

safe and secure. This could involve any kind of physical contact from hugs, to handholding, to gentle laying on of hands to support healing. In times of extreme trauma, a hug is the most meaningful of all comforts. When used with integrity and sensitivity, it is a highly effective healing tool for carers, clinicians, and family members. The healing element of touch highlights the role of human connectivity in the healing of the emotional self, especially in a world where emotional pain often goes unacknowledged.

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