

Guys need more touch for better health

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

Americans can be awkward about touching each other. Men and boys, especially, may get the impression that touching is taboo.

The thing is? Touch boosts heart, brain, and hormone health. Going without it is linked to anxiety and heart disease.

"Touch increases the brain's oxytocin levels, a chemical which aids heart health and actually makes you feel more connected," explains Scott Heydt at the Good Men Project.

"In turn, touch lowers levels of the stress hormone, cortisol," he continues. "Additionally, touch activates the orbito-frontal cortex, linked to reward and compassion feelings."

Strip away all the scientific gobbledegook, and what do you have? Common sense: touch is good for you.

HIGHER PERFORMANCE

Bonding through touch is common in sports — and it links to better performance. Athletes often trade high fives, chest bumps, and back slaps. A fanny-pat might inspire some guffaws, but it might also help you win the game.

A research team at University of Illinois tracked the physical contact between teammates during NBA basketball games. Teams and individual players who engaged in more on-court touching early in the season went on to play better and win more games.

This positive result of touch didn't change based on a player's salary, fame, or skill level. More touch early on led to more success later on, across the board.

The study inspired Henry Abbott at ESPN. He writes that some people are scared to touch others, to seem uncool or inappropriate.

"In same-gender settings like the NBA, maybe scared of appearing to be gay."

"But guess what!" he continues. "Being timid is no way to lead. NBA players face a lot of challenges. Intense defenses. Injuries. Grueling schedules. The playoffs... Some dude mocking you for hugging a teammate? Forget him. It's just small potatoes."

ROUGH AND TUMBLE

Kids instinctively tumble and play-fight like wild cubs. Stopping them may not be good for their health.

"Play — especially active physical play, like roughhousing — makes kids smart, emotionally intelligent, lovable and likable, ethical, physically fit, and joyful," according to Anthony T. DeBenedet, MD, and Lawrence J. Cohen.

Their book "The Art of Roughhousing: Good Old-Fashioned Horseplay and Why Every Kid Needs It" delves into the details.

REAL, NOT SCREEN

Touching plants, animals, humans, and natural objects is essential to normal brain development. More time spent on computer, TV, and phone screens means less time in hands-on activities.

Neuroimaging research shows that screen time damages kids' brains. Way back in 2009–2013, multiple studies on Internet addiction and gaming produced results that ranged from alarming to creepy.

"In short, excessive screen time appears to impair brain structure and function," summarizes Victoria L. Dunckley, M.D., author of "Reset Your Child's Brain."

Boys are far more susceptible to video game addiction than girls. Reduce screen time. Encourage physical activity and play. Make sure boys get outside and get their hands dirty.

EXPLICIT CONTENT

Loving, physical intimacy is a source of healthy touch. Pornography, on the other hand, can cause problems.

Males are more likely than females to become addicted to porn. Today's technology-based delivery systems work differently on the brain than the simple magazines of yore. This leads to far more time spent watching pornography, and to higher rates of addiction.

Some porn addicts lose the ability to become aroused with real partners, according to Fox News and *Mens Health*. Even non-addict porn users often develop social and relationship issues.

Reduce online porn consumption for better chances at real-life intimacy, and the touch that goes with it.

TOUCH AVOIDANCE

If touch is natural and healthy, why do

many men avoid it? Social, religious, and family factors affect how people reach out.

Men raised in non-touching families may not know how to interact physically. This physical isolation may be picked up by their sons.

Movies and TV shows often suggest that "manliness" means standing alone, looking tough. (At least John Wayne gets to touch a real horse.)

American culture hyper-sexualizes the body. Some people now associate any kind of touch with sexual intention... or fear that they will be accused of sexual intention.

Conservative sects of various religions deny touch between men and women. Some encourage followers to believe that their God-given human bodies are bad or dirty.

Liberal institutions can contribute to the problem. After the wave of #MeToo awareness, some enacted extreme "consent" rules — not for sexual touch, but for everyday human interaction. These may increase unhealthy "touch isolation."

Many people, including men, experience violence or physical coercion during their lives. After that, touch may not be welcome. If you have been abused and/or committed abuse, seek help. Call the sexual assault hotline at 1.800.656.4673 or live chat on thehotline.org.

Everyday touch can come back into your life and improve your health. For suggestions, read "Techniques for touch health" on page 15.

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The mouth is the body's gateway to health. It plays a vital part in maintaining our body's overall health. A healthy mouth is a building block to a healthy life. If we have pain in our mouth, we may choose to limit our intake to softer foods and hide our smiles. This can lead to dietary choices that are less than ideal.

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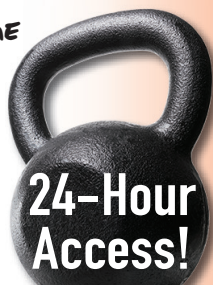
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