

# H E L P O U T

## Touching experiences

by Sandra K. Pinches, Ph.D.

The longing to touch, hold and cuddle is one of the strongest and most basic of human needs, but few of us get enough physical contact. Our society places a sexual connotation on touching between adults, then discourages sexual behavior between people who are not lovers. Many single people feel inhibited about touching or asking to be touched by anyone, because they don't want to be seen as making a sexual advance toward the wrong person. Even couples may limit physical affection to their sexual interactions.



The extreme extent of the suppression of physical contact in our society is evident from observations of other human cultures and non-human primates. Monkeys and apes spend hours touching, as they groom and flea each other, or huddle together while resting. Gorillas as a species seem to be less sexual than humans, but are physically af-

fectionate with each other and with other animals.

Human societies which do not sexualize all touching tend to touch more than we do. In some African countries it is common to see adult men walking together hand in hand. Women and men in some cultures sleep in the same sex groups with bodies intertwined, like litters of kittens. Even in our own country in the last century, adolescent or adult sisters could share a bed and snuggle without being suspected of incest.

Some humanistic psychotherapists believe that deprivation of physical contact is responsible for many emotional problems which have previously been attributed to more complicated causes. Psychotherapy clients who get close to the source of their suffering often do identify their feelings as an unmet need to be held. Unfortunately, most people have repressed their need for physical affection so deeply that a lot of insight must be achieved before they recognize what they want. Touch-deprived individuals usually develop doubts about their self-worth and attractiveness as an explanation for the lack of affection shown to them. Rather than risk more rejections, they try to stop having the need to be touched, resulting in a loss of awareness of the body, a hardening of demeanor, and feelings of tension, depression or irritability. Many people turn to food or drug binges for comfort, since these forms of substance abuse are actually more permissible and obtainable in our society than is

non-sexual physical affection.

Of course, most people try to find socially acceptable ways to meet their need for touch, which drives them into sexual relationships. Single people who could and should perhaps wait longer before jumping into a new relationship are less able to hold back when there is no other form of physical intimacy in their lives. Sexual passion may fade early in a relationship if sex served primarily as a means of being touched. This development can be even more disappointing when partial satisfaction of the need to be touched is followed by a re-evaluation of the chosen partner. Severe deprivation generally leads people to see what they want to see, where they want to see it. When the rosy distortion produced by wishful thinking goes away, the partner may appear much less desirable.

Lesbians and gay men experience more severe difficulties with touch taboos than do heterosexuals, because homophobia complicates the sexualization of touch. A heterosexual woman, for example, when touched by a male friend, may misinterpret the contact as sexual and politely refuse him. If she is touched by a woman who is openly lesbian, however, she is more likely to be disgusted, offended or threatened, and to reject all physical contact with the lesbian.

Within the gay community as well, touching can be easily confused with sexual behavior. Gay people are defined as such because of their minority sexual preference, which can lead both gays and non-gays to overemphasize the sexual aspect of homosexuality. At bars and other gay meeting places, many individuals appear to go out of their way to color their communications with sexual innuendo. They seem to need to broadcast and affirm the fact that they are attracted to same-sexed partners, which probably stems from gay identity issues more than from sexual desires. This behavior pattern is understandable as a response to the social stigmatization and suppression of homosexuality, but it decreases still further the already limited opportunities for gay people to touch non-sexually.

Overcoming inhibitions around physical affection is difficult, since fears of rejection or misinterpretation by others are often justified. People who want to increase the amount of touching in their circle of close friends can sometimes make the changes more smoothly by discussing the issue first. Most people are touch-deprived and will welcome more contact, but they dislike the anxiety which accompanies the change. The sensitivity groups of the late 1960s owed much of their popularity to the fact that they offered a space in which touch was encouraged, where participants could increase physical contact without appearing to be conspicuously different from the norm.

In the 1980s high touch services tend to involve individual attention rather than group interaction. The rapid growth in visibility of the massage profession is an example. Not only does massage help to meet people's needs for touching, but legitimate massage professionals have done much to convince the public that intimate physical contact need not be sexual. The weakening of the association between sex and touch allows people more freedom to initiate touching without triggering anxiety about sexual taboos.

Students of social trends are generally predicting that high touch values will continue to replace our culture's traditional restraints on physical contact. Individuals at the cutting edge of social changes experience most of the anxiety, conflict and negative consequences which accompany new behavior, so the present generation will undoubtedly go through some awkward moments. We can, however, look forward to a warmer, cozier, happier world, as physical affection assumes a more prominent role in our lives.

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