

Touch as Nutrition

Written by John Tuite

Tuesday, 01 September 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 08:02

New research reveals that few of us are getting the amount of daily physical contact we need...a deficiency that is taking its toll on our health.

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NUTRITION

Touch as Nutrition

New research reveals that few of us are getting the amount of daily physical contact we need...a deficiency that is taking its toll on our health

By John Tuite

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Touch could properly be regarded as a form of nutrition. We mistakenly think that touch occurs on the periphery of our selves, a skin thing. But truthfully, each surface stimulus travels far into the most hidden-internal landscapes of our selves, weaving long nerve cells right through the buried spinal core to sense and gather in the deep fields of our brain. It's not by accident that our skin and brain are each generated from a single ectoderm substance, cascading outward and inward as we grow in the womb, because right at the very root of us, we are built to connect the inner and outer worlds.

The necessity of nurturing touch is very clear when we see it our youngest. Without it, young children wither and even die, even if they are provided with food and medicine.

Slightly older children typically find ways to build a huge, varied diet of touch into their lives, from tumbling unexpectantly onto their parents' shoulders, rolling on the floor with siblings, or wrestling with friends, to rubbing, sitting on knees, being carried, stroked and gently soothed. Children actively shape their sense of self, not just mentally but with their hands, elbows and knees, their bodies and mouths, inside the frequency, texture and intensity of this constant, rich field of contact.

(This is why non-nurturing, violent or invasive touch can be so devastating for a child: it disconnects right in

the deep heartland of a child's emerging identity.)

As we grow up we exchange this banquet of physical contact, all that rough and tumble rolling around, for... well, often for very little.

For most of us, growing up coincides with a reduction in the range and quality of our tactile life. Our diet of nurturing physical contact thins out and narrows down. Ask yourself: How did your tactile day go today?

In fact, if we do assign a nutritional value to touch, it is clear that many—perhaps most—adults, regardless of whether they are alone or in partnership, suffer from significant degrees of starvation in this arena. While some adults participate in contact sports or practices, or seek out massage or physical therapies, most do not. While some adults have relationships that offer them a range of healthy touch, most relationships do not. Instead, we have a state of widespread tactile famine, a malnourishment so entrenched we cannot even see that it exists.

We participate in this undernourishing of the body in many ways. The abundance of touching we once offered to others, for example, soon becomes rationed out, reserved for appropriate moments with appropriate people. Unlike the sometimes-chaotic, impromptu and spontaneous interactions of children at play, almost all of these moments—a handshake, a friendly hug, a pat on a colleague's back—are highly stereotyped, inhibited and fairly unconscious exchanges of brief physical contact. Most of these moments also require a highly muted intensity.

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The necessity of nurturing touch is very clear when we are at our youngest. Without it, young children wither and even die, even if they are provided with food and medicine.

Slightly older children typically find ways to build a huge, varied diet of touch into their lives, from tumbling unexpectedly onto their parents' shoulders, rolling on the floor with siblings, or wrestling with friends, to cuddling, sitting on knees, being carried, stroked and gently soothed. Children actively shape their sense of self, not just mentally, but with their hands, elbows and knees, their bellies and mouths, inside the frequency, textures and intensities of this constant, rich field of contact.

(This is why non-nurturing, violent or invasive touch can be so devastating for a child: It does harm right in the deep heartland of a child's emerging identity.)

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In fact, if we do assign a nutritional value to touch, it is clear that many—perhaps most—adults, regardless of whether they are alone or in partnership, suffer from significant degrees of starvation in this arena. While some adults participate in contact sports or practices, or seek out massage or physical therapies, most do not. While some adults have relationships that offer them a range of healthy touch, most relationships do not. Instead, we have a state of widespread tactile famine, a malnourishment so entrenched we cannot even see that it exists.

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Equally, our ascension into adulthood is often accompanied by the acquisition of goods and services that reduce the tactile shock of the world on our systems. Comfortable furniture, convenient transport over smooth highways, and clothes and shoes that protect us from temperature or bumps in the ground: All conspire to soothe and dull the senses, especially touch. We are not numb, but we have arranged the world to induce a kind of torpor compared to what we could experience.

Touch cannot be talked about in polite society. No index of well-being seems to have measured it. But sometimes the absence of touch is acknowledged by proxy. Loneliness is one of its stand-ins. Loneliness has many dimensions, but the absence of being held, stroked or touched is surely one of its most painful characteristics. The U.K. has a particular crisis, coming 26th out of 28 European countries in a survey of who has neighbors or friends to turn to. According to the Campaign to End Loneliness, lacking social connections has an effect on health equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The loneliness which blights the last years of so many elderly people in our culture is based just as much on a physical deprivation as an emotional one. Two-fifths of elderly people surveyed report that the television is their main company. And we know that loneliness can kill just as assuredly at this end of life as physical isolation can kill at the beginning. Solitary elderly people are almost 50 percent more likely to die early than those who have family, friends or community.

We could talk about poverty of touch just as validly as poverty of wealth; frequently the two go together. Walk around a poor neighborhood, and along with cramped and frayed housing, you will see many people, perhaps adults more than children, for whom reliable and consistent nurturing touch is but a memory, a yearning, perhaps an inflamed wound, rather than a daily, sustaining occurrence.

I am sure that, for some people, turning to aggression and physical violence is an ill-judged act

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of substitution, motivated by a desperate need for deep, meaningful contact. The shoving, grappling and hitting provide a perverse reminder, a tragic hint of the intense physical significance we all depend on for our sense of mattering in the world.

Individually and collectively, we need to recover a world that will nurture us, and build a society that will sustain rather than erode us. Social and economic policies that prioritize real human need are priorities. But part of this task will also be to regenerate the possibilities of healthy, nurturing touch in our lives and in our culture.

There are many reasons to think this is possible, because half of the work is to simply pay attention to our already existing tactile experience, and to edge it forward just a little. As we pick up the mug of tea, we notice the weight and shape, the particular balance between strength and delicacy the porcelain has achieved, the contrast between the experience of the fingers and the experience of the lips. We can ignore the signs, step off the path and walk on the bumpy grass, among the trees, trailing a hand across their trunks. We can once more hold our partner's hand with some portion of the attention we brought to the miraculous first time we felt those fingers wrap around ours.

With the key in the front door at the end of a stressful day, we can appreciate the ability of children to restore us. They plunge us back into a universe of sensation and tactile experience. They climb on us, tumble over our heads or shoulders, jump on our backs, elbow us and knee us and rough us gloriously up. They break through the crust we have carefully built around our nerve system. They speak to us at a level we have forgotten about, but thirst for: the elemental dimension of physical contact.

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