

Improve Your Relationship with the Power of Touch

“Touch is the first sense we acquire and the secret weapon in many a successful relationship.”

~Rick Chillot, *Louder Than Words*

In a typical first session with a couple, I try to gather a lot of information about their relationship history. Though there are several important questions asked during this initial session, I believe that one of the most *telling* is: “How often do you and your partner show affection, in terms of hugging, kissing, cuddling, or holding hands?” In general, when a couple responds that they have very low levels of touch in their relationship, I know that there are much deeper relational issues at hand. This isn’t a perfect science, but in the many years that I’ve been working with couples, knowing how frequently they have non-sexual physical contact with one another speaks volumes to me as their therapist about their overall level of satisfaction with the relationship.

The power of touch in relationships is not new information. In fact, in 1958 psychologist Harry Harlow ran a scientific study titled, “The Nature of Love.” In this study, he used newborn rhesus monkeys to explore the biological need for love, affection and explored the role of attachment. Two newborn rhesus monkeys were taken from their mothers and were given surrogates, one made of wire with an attached bottle of food and the other made from soft terrycloth, with no bottle. Given both options, these infant monkeys spent significantly more time with the surrogate made from the soft terrycloth, even though it did not provide them with food. Harlow’s study revealed that “contact comfort is a variable of overwhelming importance in the development of affectional response” and was found to be overwhelmingly more important than the base need for nourishment.

In a similar study, the two infant monkeys were put in separate cages, one with the wire “mother” and the other with the terrycloth “mother.” The results of that study showed that the monkey with the wire “mother” eventually started to shut down, seemed to be depressed, showed stunted growth, and inability to gain weight. This was eventually given the term “failure to thrive” in the mid-1990’s. [On a personal note, I want to acknowledge that I feel these studies were cruel and possibly unethical in terms of the treatment of these animals. Nevertheless, the results provided information that has heavily influenced our understanding of human development.]

When treating couples who have very little physical contact in their relationships, I will frequently share Harlow’s work with them as an example of the need for touch and what happens when we’re deprived of it. I liken the relationship itself to the monkey with the wire “mother” and their current unhappiness in the relationship as subsequent evidence of its “failure to thrive” due to the lack of affection.

Recent science including the study of the brain, and neurotransmitters in the brain, has provided a scientific explanation for what is actually happening in our brains and bodies, when being touched. We now know that touch lowers the levels of Cortisol (a hormone produced due to stress) and increases the release of Oxytocin (a hormone responsible for pair-bonding and trust). Thus, in addition to helping your partner relieve feelings of stress and anxiety, your touch also helps to improve feelings of trust, empathy, and helps create a stronger bond between the two of you. If you are trying to improve the quality of your relationship, look for opportunities to increase the amount of non-sexual touch in your daily interactions with one another. Here are some suggestions:

- Start and end your day with a hug and/or a kiss.
- While watching television together, try to have as much body contact as possible. This could be holding hands, cuddling, running your fingers through their hair with their head in your lap, a neck rub, etc.

- While one of you is cooking or doing the dishes, the other has the opportunity to come up behind them and give a hug or a soft kiss on the neck.
- If your partner is on the computer, take a moment to rub their neck/shoulders for a moment.
- While driving in the car, as long as it's not distracting, put your hand on their neck, shoulder, or leg.
- At any time, a gentle touch to the arm or shoulder can have a big impact.

It's important to note that you and your partner may have different levels of need for touch. For example, one may require more frequent touch in order to feel secure in the relationship, while the other requires very little. In my field, this need is referred to as *skin hunger*. If you're aware of differing levels of skin hunger in your relationship, consider the importance of touch for the other and try to meet this need. You may be surprised at how this, in turn, helps them thrive and enables them to better meet your needs. As noted in Rick Chillot's recent article, *Louder Than Words*, **“The true indicator of a healthy long-term relationship is not how often your partner touches you, but how often your partner touches you in response to your touch.”** He notes that the reciprocity of touch is really the true indicator of emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Finally, if you are in a relationship and you've tried the aforementioned suggestions and seem to be hitting a road block, it may be time to seek the assistance of a professional to help you and your partner with possible underlying relationship issues. If you are both willing to do the work, it's never too late!

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