The Healing Power of Touch

By Andrea Lyle

It was a cold December night. Upon arriving at the hospital for my night shift, I discovered I had been reassigned from my normal orthopedics floor to the oncology floor. Although I had done a rotation through oncology in nursing school, as a new grad with less than six months under my belt, my experience was limited. My patients were assigned to me with the usual rundown of their current status, and I went about making my rounds. However, nothing I received in report prepared me for what I faced when I walked into Mr. T’s room.

Lying in the bed was what looked like a corpse. Ashen gray skin covered a skeleton of a man who was still somehow alert and breathing. I was taken aback and certain that he and his wife could easily read the shock on my face. I quickly gathered my composure and introduced myself as his nurse for the night. While asking him questions about how he was feeling, I reached down and touched his ice-cold hand. He quickly took my hand in his and placed his other hand on top of it, as if starved for attention. When we touched, I could feel the desperation of a man wanting to be acknowledged, even though his life force was waning. I felt his resignation, as he seemed painfully aware his demise was near.

Our eyes met, and it was evident he felt my love and compassion. His wife looked at me with tears in her eyes and whispered “thank you.” For the rest of my shift, I spent as much time as possible in Mr. T’s room -- talking with him, holding his hand, and sharing as he took on a more peaceful demeanor. That experience made me profoundly aware of how powerful touch can be.

Numerous studies have shown that friendly, affectionate touch is a transfer of energy between two people that causes the release of oxytocin -- sometimes referred to as the “love hormone.” The release of oxytocin lowers blood pressure, decreases cortisol (the stress-related hormone) and increases pain tolerance. The Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami, School of Medicine has carried out studies into touch and found evidence of significant effects, including faster growth in premature babies, decreased autoimmune disease symptoms, lowered glucose levels in children with diabetes and improved immune systems in people with cancer. Other research findings hint that touch can also halt or slow the progress of disease.

Dr. Matthew Hertenstein at Indiana’s DePauw University has discovered the touch of practitioners and strangers can be as therapeutic as the touch of a loved one because touch communicates emotion. Dr. Hertenstein states “Our study is the first to provide rigorous evidence showing that humans can reliably signal love, gratitude and sympathy with touch. These findings raise the interesting possibility that touch may convey more positive emotions than the face.”

Science is now catching up with what many have known for centuries. Touch heals. In ancient times this healing was known as “laying on of hands.” Today the modern practices of Healing Touch and Reiki utilize the same principles. In 1989 RN, Janet Mentgen, developed a healing touch approach as a form of complementary medicine. She states “healing touch is a way to assist the body’s natural healing process by redirecting and rebalancing its energy fields.” Both Healing Touch and Reiki are now being utilized as therapies in hospitals, clinics, alternative therapy centers and even churches all over the country.

In our high-tech society, some people can go hours, days or even weeks and months without any physical contact. Years ago, studies showed babies who were not held and cuddled, even though they had all their other needs met, failed to thrive. Could it be this failure to thrive occurs in all of us when the need for touch is not met? While social media keeps us connected in a certain sense, nothing replaces being able to look another in the eyes, or reach out and actually touch someone in real time and space.

Adding touch to your day is a very simple way to harness the health benefits it offers to mind, body and soul. Here are a few tips on how to increase touch in your everyday life:

**Hugs**: Studies show when you put your heart against another’s heart, left side to left side, in a hug it actually increases your energy level. Hugging in our traditional sense, right side to right side, avoids the heart connection and lowers energy levels. So hug often, hug long and hug heart to heart.

**Schedule a Reiki, massage or healing touch session**: We are fortunate in the Lake Country to have practitioners like The Cardiology Care Clinic, which offers Reiki as one of their Lifestyle Medicine Services. Cheerful Hearts incorporates healing touch through Raindrop Therapy. There are numerous massage therapists to choose from, as well.

**Connect with animals:** Touch doesn’t always have to be person to person. Research shows connecting with animals has similar effects on well-being. Play with your pets, groom them, or just let them lay in your lap. If you don’t have a pet, you can always volunteer at the local Humane Society to get your dose of touch with a dog or cat.

**Cuddle, hold hands, or even just pat someone on the back**: These are all simple ways to add a measure of touch to your life and to others, as well.

**Get a pedicure**: Not only do you pamper your feet, but you get a healthy serving of touch in the process.

**Join an interest group:** Gathering in community offers ample opportunity to touch not only physically, but also at the heart level by sharing yourself with others. Check out the local offerings at The Arts Barn. Music, dance and art are all great ways to commune together, play and find self-expression, while benefiting your health in the process.

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