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How Touch Communicates Feelings
By Jane Peterson, PhD

I recently came across a fascinating little video clip by Dacher Keltner, PhD. His work builds on earlier research showing how touch subconsciously affects people. He claims that we can discern up to twelve different common emotional states of other people through the quality of their touch! In the study, participants were unable to see or hear the person who touched them. The person who did the touching was asked to feel and then communicate a specific emotional state through a one second contact with other person's forearm. For almost all cases, participants - of either gender - were able to identify correctly most of the time the feeling the "toucher" was attempting to communicate. There were two very interesting exceptions. When a woman was trying to communicate to a man the emotion of anger, he had no idea what emotional state she was trying communicate. Conversely, when a man attempted to communicate compassion through his touch, the woman could not identify that emotion correctly. No wonder we have issues of gender communication! These two exceptions aside, this research would indicate that human beings are designed to be in contact with each other and to read and respond to emotional states from many different cues: facial expression, gesture, voice tone, and now touch, all clue us in to what another person is feeling.

Frequent touch has definite health benefits. Tiffany Field's Touch Research Institute has attempted to quantify the medical benefits of touch and to influence the practice of medicine to include touch. Warm, calming touch measurably slows the cardiovascular system, induces weight gain in pre-mature infants, improves attention, and reduces depressive symptoms - and that's just for starters. Children whose teacher touches them in a friendly and welcome manner are twice as likely to speak up in the classroom as children who are not touched. Primate research shows that our ancestors spent at least 20 percent of their time in physical contact by grooming each other. These "grooming partners" share food and defend each other when social dynamics in the group become difficult. Anthropologists have shown that in several "primitive" cultures people spend their days in constant contact with others of their clan or tribe.

By now, if you are like me you are thinking of how seldom we touch other human beings compared to how frequently we touch our cell phones and computers, and wondering what the implications of redirection of connection actually are for our culture. Fields' compared touch frequency and kind between French and US adolescents and found that the French children touched more frequently, in more friendly ways, and were less aggressive with their peers than were the American adolescents. The same held true for pre-schoolers. The

French children who enjoyed frequent, friendly contact with parents were less aggressive towards their peers than the less contacted US children.

What does it say about us that we are touching our electronics more frequently than our families? Why don't we touch? Touch in our culture has been both commercialized (you hire a massage therapist to receive soothing touch, for instance) and sexualized (witness the law-suits over improper touch in the work place.) To my knowledge no one has yet done studies that count the kind and quality of touches shown in our film and television media, however, I would wager that touch is usually used as a plot device (the accidental collision that is a fateful meeting between characters) or is shown in a sexualized context. Whatever happened to good, old, friendly touch?

To understand the implications of this lack of touch, let's start with the definition of human beings offered by Thomas Hanna, the founder of Somatics that a human being is a soma, a "living body in its wholeness." That means that you are not an object (body) or a mind-projection (ego), but rather a vital, living process that exists and thrives in a social matrix with other somas. If we are social somas, then touch is the medium that makes us whole. I'm not sure what the solution to this "touch deprivation" is for our modern culture. I invite you to join me, however, in coming up with safe, calming, and friendly ways to touch each other more frequently - at least as often as we touch our computers!

For a more extensive interview with Dacher Keltner and Paul Ekman, watch this online video.

TIP - Reach out and touch someone safely

As Keltner notes in his discussion, our skin is exquisitely sensitive to the quality of contact we receive from other people. Not only that, human hands are one of the most amazing characteristics of our species. Our hands create and use tools, gesture and signal effectively, grasp and care for our children. This magnificent opposable thumb enables us to do many things denied to species less flexibly endowed. While much of our person-to-person touch is ritually constrained (such as the hand shake or kiss on the cheek), touching beyond these normal rituals carries layers of meaning often received at a subconscious level. Without being aware of it, we sense the emotional and physical state of those who touch us.

As Keltner's research showed, we can discern the correct emotional state of another person in just one second of contact. We are much more sensitive than we realize, and yet mostly unaware of what we know. Not only the quality of touch, but the frequency of touch carries meaning for us. One study compared the frequency of spontaneous, non-ritualized touch

between conversational partners in cafes. In Britian, there were no spontaneous touches between conversational partners for the time period used in the study. In the US, the participants touched twice at moments of excitement. In Puerto Rico, the conversant touched a total of 180 times in the same time period! Given the many health benefits discovered by Tiffany Field's link and others research into the health benefits of human contact, no wonder Keltner says our Western culture is touch-deprived!

Let's say you've decided to take the challenge that I offer in the Comment above and have decided you want to touch people more often, and let's say you are a man working in an office with a lot of women, and you don't want to give the wrong message. Michael Grinder, an expert in non-verbal communication, noted that there are some ways of touching that are perceived as safer than others by the person being touched. Because we are so sensitive to touch, we are easily startled by unexpected touch. It's an unpleasant surprise to have someone sneak up on you and touch you before you are aware of his presence. So our office worker should make sure that the person he wants to make contact with is aware of his presence before touching.

The next thing to notice is the shape of that hand of yours. Remember that opposable thumb, so distinctive to human beings? This arrangement gives human beings a powerful grip. Once we close our hand around someone's arm we have considerable leverage over their body. An open-palmed touch on a forearm carries the implications of grasp. Test this out on a friend. Place your open palm on their forearm and notice how easy it is for you to grasp their arm (and how difficult it is for them to "lay a hand on you" in this situation!) Once you have a hold on their forearm, their opposable is useless for grasping you. You "have the upper hand" so to speak. Because of this, an open palmed touch is more intimate and carries more suggestions of control than touching someone gently with the back of the palm. Test this out on your friend again. This time touch the side of their forearm with the back of your palm, i.e., the open palm is towards you. This is a very neutral touch - it allows you to make contact, to communicate positive feelings without feeling controlling or invasive.

There is, of course, a lot more that could be said about theart of non-verbal communication and especially touch, and I hope that this Tip invites you to reach out and touch more people in your daily life in a safe and friendly way.