
A TOUCHING SUBJECT

By

Mark Matthews

Touch is a language of its own. Words can evoke memories of touch but in no way can they replace touch. If a picture is worth a thousand words then a touch must be worth a trillion or more. I honestly despair at the thought of trying to capture the importance of touch in a mere article.

I recall the early days of AHP and encounter groups when the media used to regard our activities with some alarm due to the amount of touching that was such a large part of those happy days. The British culture has a big taboo against touch except in very circumscribed situations. Most of the taboo is related to sexual fears. Even in these enlightened days I would hesitate to ask for a massage from a non AHP person.

I should not be writing this article for the taboo is very much part of my life. I cannot recall being cuddled as a child. I have found a friend who knows how to cuddle me and I still feel ashamed as though it were dirty. For the voyeurs I will admit to a surrogate daughter. I am just longing for my son to provide me with a grandchild who I can spoil or failing that I want a pet. Yes it is sad.

When we conceived this issue it was agreed that touch was an important way to communicate with the elderly. I searched very hard to get some positive article. Sadly that was not available.

Dr Sally Redfern who, with a colleague, has done the most recent research found no positive correlation between touch and the well being of elderly patients. I do not in any way wish to diminish her work and wish to place on record that she was most open in her conversations. I think she was as disappointed with the results as I was. Science must be rigorous in the study of anything. The conclusion I draw from her work is that touch is not a scientific subject. It can be studied but the baby goes out with the bathwater in the process.

My own research is however very positive. Everyone, without exception, holds the view that touch is a very important form of communication. Not any old touch but specific touch. The way we shake hands on a business deal; the first touch of a future lover; the touch of a mate saying goodbye or that hug that says hello while the words are caustic. And there is the grope; the sense of touch that is an invasion of privacy and personal space. We all know about touch. But it is a very private language and doubly important for being so.

I cannot reach out from this page and touch you but the fact that I know this should re-assure you. I have a health problem which prevents me writing about the very interesting chapter that I wanted to quote but the publisher rejected. Not because he disliked the content but it seemed incomplete. And it was.

The book is called 'Research In The Nursing Care Of Elderly People' published by J Wiley & Sons Ltd. The specific chapter is titled ' A Study of Non -Verbal Communication Between Nurses and Elderly Patients' by Andree C Le May and Sally J Redfern. Crown Copyright. Both are doctors.

The chapter is well referenced and their research is valid to me on this basis alone. For example at the start of the chapter they quote research by A Mehrabian (Non-Verbal Communication. Adline Publishing Co.) which indicated that words only accounted for 7% of meaning. Yes 7%. I am so tired of words.

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