



Vista Psychological & Counseling Centre

FOCUS NEWSLETTER

THE MAGIC OF YOUR TOUCH

For centuries, mothers have instinctively known it works—pick up young children and they’ll stop crying. Gently rub a baby’s back and it’s off to dreamland they go. Now scientists are also coming to recognize the power of touch—and not just touch therapies such as reflexol-

Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine, has studied the benefits of touch for many years. Her book, Touch, reviews medical and sociological research on the importance of touch to good health and also that the Western world, including the medical profession, has marginalized and minimized its importance. According to Dr. Field, many forms of touch can help reduce pain, anxiety, depression and aggressive behavior...promote immune function and healing...lower heart rate and blood pressure...and improve air flow in asthmatics. All this and no drug side effects!

Previous research has suggested that touch deprivation leads to aggression and violent behavior in animals, so it is no surprise that Dr. Field was concerned that living in a largely touch deprived Western society could have negative consequences. It was her concern that led researchers at the Touch Research Institute to examine how touch is treated differently in two cities with very different cultures—Miami and Paris. In one study, published in *Early Child Development and Care* in 1999, Dr. Field and her colleagues measured how much affectionate touch preschoolers received from their parents on playgrounds and also the children’s level of aggressive behavior. In Paris, they found there was more touch toward peers and parents by children and less aggression. In a separate study, researchers also observed that French adolescents — raised with more affectionate touch —were more affectionate and less physically and verbally aggressive with one another than American adolescents. This association does not imply or prove causation, but does make a case for closer examination with further research.

Dr. Field explained that the benefits of touch seem to stem largely from its ability to reduce cortisol, a stress hormone manufactured by the adrenal glands. This was measured in two dozen studies. She states that touching with moderate pressure (a firm handshake) stimulates activity in the vagus nerve, one of the 12 cranial nerves in the brain, which in turn slows the heart and decreases the production of stress hormones including cortisol. (continued on page 2)



**Reach out and touch for wellness and well-being**

ogy, but simple acts such as giving a backrub, holding hands, sharing a hug or putting your arm around someone. With research demonstrating the healing power of touch, more hospitals are incorporating massage programs into care protocols for cancer and cardiovascular patients, among others.

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# THE MAGIC OF YOUR TOUCH (continued from page one)

Other studies published from the Touch Research Institute, published in peer-reviewed journals, demonstrate that touch contributes to...

- **Decreased pain.** Children with mild to moderate juvenile rheumatoid arthritis who were given massages by their parents 15 minutes per day for one month experienced less anxiety and lower cortisol levels. Over a 30 day period, parents, kids and their physicians reported less pain overall in the children.
- **Enhanced immune function.** In studies, women with breast cancer and HIV patients showed a measurable increase in natural killer cells—part of a line of defense in the immune system against virus-infected cells and cancer cells—after massage.
- **Happier, healthier babies.** Preemies who were touched more while in the NICU gained more weight.
- **Less labor pain.** Women in labor who received a back rub the first 15 minutes of every hour of labor reported less pain and made fewer requests for pain medications. Their labor was also shorter, on average.
- **Enhanced alertness and performance.** Following massage, adults

completed math problems in significantly less time and with fewer errors.

Touching is good for the giver as well as the recipient, says Dr. Field. She cites a study in which 20 children with leukemia were given daily massages by their parents. After one month, the parents' depressed moods improved, and the children's white blood cell and neutrophil counts increased. In another study of elderly volunteers who were trained to give massages to infants, Dr. Field found that after three weeks the seniors experienced improved mood with less anxiety or depression, decreased levels of stress hormones and more social contacts and fewer doctor visits.

Touch comes more naturally to some people than others. You can make a conscious effort to bring more touch into your daily life—and more happiness to yourself and those around you. Give your kids hugs when they leave for school in the morning and when they come home. Hold your partner's hand when you take a walk, exchange back rubs and don't forget good-night kisses. Pet your dog or cat. Schedule a few sessions with a professional massage therapist and pay attention to what feels especially good—then try it at home on one another. Relax and enjoy.

Source: Tiffany Field, Ph.D. director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine in Florida.



*Make a conscious effort to bring more touch into your daily life.*

## HAPPINESS

Researchers have discovered what happiness is made of...

- **50% of happiness is determined by a personal “set point”**—the level of happiness that is natural to a person, and to which the person will naturally tend to return.
- **Only 10% of happiness results from good or bad “life circumstances”**—even major ones such as winning the lottery or becoming seriously ill. While such factors

may affect happiness, in the short run, people are remarkably adaptable to them and soon return to their set points.

- **40% of happiness results from intentional activity.** These are thoughts and behavior that require effort, such as building rewarding relationships...setting goals and feeling the satisfaction of accomplishing them...counting one's

blessings...helping others in need.

S. Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology, Univ. of California, Riverside.

# HOW TO COMFORT A BEREAVED FRIEND OR RELATIVE

Well meaning people often say the wrong thing....Thirty years after her son's death, my friend still smarts when she remembers all the people who pointed out how lucky she was to have two other children. Another friend, whose brother recently died, grumbles that everyone keeps telling her it will get better with time. Having received my share of insensitive, even hurtful, comments after my son, Michael died 13 years ago, I certainly understand. Even people with good intentions often say and do the wrong thing.

If you want to comfort a grieving friend or relative, your primary task is to validate his/her feelings. Don't say anything that minimizes those feelings—which, in effect, “de-legitimizes” them.

## WHAT NOT TO DO

I've found that “de-legitimizers” can be divided into six categories...

**Babblers.** These people chatter on about the weather, a friend who had a heart attack and so on. But ignoring the elephant in the room just makes it bigger.

**Advice-givers.** People often give advice, such as, “Start dating again”...or, “take a long vacation”... “concentrate on your other children”... “it's time to get over it”...or, “remember the good times.” But when we hear this advice,

we may interpret it as, “What's wrong with you? If only you would take my wise counsel, you'd feel better.” I remember that people advised me to take a sedative, but somehow I knew that I needed to shed a certain number of tears (more than I could ever have imagined) and that it would be counter-productive to try to mask my pain with medication.

**Platitude-offerers.** When you spout clichés, such as, “God must have wanted him...he's in a better place,” the bereaved may feel offended. You may prefer to believe God must have wanted him, but the bereaved person may hate God at the moment and thus feel de-legitimized for feeling what they feel.



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**Pseudo-empathizers.** It's particularly distressing for those experiencing “high grief”—for example, from the loss

of a child—to hear, “I know just how you feel.” If you haven't experienced the same loss, you have no idea how a person feels—and maybe not even then.

**Lesson-learners.** There may be profound lessons to be learned from tragedy, but it's best to let others learn them in their own time and ways.

Don't say, “Everything happens for a reason”... “We must learn to appreciate our lives...” or “Life is short.”

**Abandoners.** Whatever the conscious or unconscious rationalizations—such as fear of saying the wrong thing or feeling uncomfortable in the face of grief—if you walk away from a friend who needs you, you're probably walking away from the friendship permanently.

Source: Fran Dorf is author of the novels *Saving Elijah* (Putnam), inspired by the loss of her son, Michael, and *Flight* (Vivisphere). She holds a master's degree in psychology and conducts “writing for healing” workshops to help people cope with their losses, Stamford, Connecticut. [www.frandorf.com](http://www.frandorf.com)

## A REFLECTION ON “BE-ING”

Be understanding to your enemies. Be loyal to your friends. Be strong enough to face the world each day. Be weak enough to know you cannot do everything alone. Be generous to those who need your help. Be frugal with what you need yourself. Be wise enough to know that you do not know everything. Be foolish enough to believe in miracles. Be willing to share the sorrows of oth-

ers. Be a leader when you see a path others have missed. Be a follower when you are shrouded by the mists of uncertainty. Be the first to congratulate an opponent who succeeds. Be the last to criticize a colleague who fails. Be sure where your next step will fall, so that you will not stumble. Be sure of your final destination, in case you are going the wrong way. Be loving to those who

love you. Be loving to those who do not love you, and they may change.

Anonymous



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### 3 MYTHS ABOUT MONEY

Replace the myths below with an accurate understanding of money, and you'll be on your way to turning your financial situation around:

**MYTH #1.** Everything in my life would be wonderful if only I had more money coming in! **Reality:** More money coming in is usually accompanied by more money going out.

**MYTH #2.** Financial well-being is defined by either how much money I have or how much I earn. **Reality:** Financial well-being has to do with how much money you keep of what you earn, how well you manage what you have, and how soundly you sleep at night.

**MYTH #3.** Using credit is healthy. It allows you to buy what you want now and pay a bit off later, when money will be worth less. **Reality:** In most cases, debt is bondage. Research shows that the people least likely to achieve finan-

cial independence are those who spend up to the limit of their credit cards and then pay off the minimum allowed each month. To avoid that trap, follow these credit usage guidelines.

- Pay off credit card balance at the end of each month. If you can't do this, consider cutting up your credit cards until you can.
- Avoid using credit cards to finance your standard of living. It's better to reduce your standard of living while you plan strategies for increasing your income.
- Unless it's absolutely necessary resist using a home equity loan. Yes, it's at a lower interest rate than regular credit cards, but psychologically, it's unwise to finance your standard of living by agreeing to own less of your home.

Financial concern continues to be one of the most common areas of conflict among couples. Head off financial disagreement with your partner before they happen....

- **Talk about money when financial problems are not pressing.** *Helpful:* Schedule a monthly money meeting.
- **Keep both partners involved in the finances**—even if one is better suited to handle them.
- **Trade off financial tasks every month**, or divide them so that both partners are involved—perhaps one balances the checkbook and the other pays the bills.

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