**The Tao of Touch**

*By: Dr. Roger Landry, MD, MPH*

When I was in the military, assigned away from my family and living alone, I thought, “OK, this isn’t easy, but I can do it. I have always liked my alone time, so I’m just getting a little more.” But after a couple of months a peculiar and surprising thing happened. When I would go out to eat in a restaurant, I would engage the servers in ways I never had before; not only asking their name and inquiring about their story, but shaking their hand and touching their arm or back. I thought this strange for me until I realized I was going weeks without touching another human.

Of course, I was aware of the research on human touch: how premature infants thrive on skin to skin touch; how cortisol levels and stress are reduced by touch; how pain is reduced and immune system enhanced. Hugging releases dopamine which helps the immune system, cures depression, reduces stress and induces sleep. I remember having a tooth pulled and how the dental assistant’s hand on my shoulder was even more effective than novocaine. Yet somehow, like most of us, I took for granted whatever physical contact I had in my life. All this research wasn’t about ME.

**Touch reduces our stress.**

But all this shouldn’t be a surprise. Imagine our distant ancestors in cold dark caves and how comforting it must have been to be close to your tribe mates. We are herd creatures and like others of the same ilk, we are better together… the closer the better. Yes, touching is reassurance … an elixir of health. And speaking of creatures, closeness to them can also be very beneficial. Touching dogs frequently results in lowered blood pressure, pulse, and levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.

So yes, even our hunter-gatherer ancestors sought out touching of some kind, and we have inherited that as a need. They thrived, and we’re the product of their success. The preferences that worked for them, work for us also. I’ll bet even Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* probably needed a hug every now and then.

Just as silence defines noise (that is, noise needs silence in order to exist), maybe it’s the absence of touching that defines or establishes the value of touch … go without it and its value rises.

**What’s a guy like me to do?**

Women seem to get it. They tend to seek out touch, and I for one believe it’s one of the reasons they live longer than we do. But what about us guys? My generation (which had just crawled out of the caves), grew up in a world where hugging was rare, even among families and spouses … really. Of course, today, a hug is much cooler and accepted, even if it’s one of those one solid slap-on-the-back kind or touching cheek-only types. The point is, it’s OK, and that’s a great start. Research says it takes about 10 seconds of hugging to get the full dose of dopamine, the feel-good hormone. OK, maybe you’re not going in for 10 seconds with your aunt Lucy or your old college roommate, but where you can, linger. It’s more bang for the buck.

And it’s not only about hugging. There’s value in my old approach of touching someone’s back or shoulder, or a sincere handshake, or touching an arm. It gets the healthy hormones flowing and makes us feel that perhaps we’re not alone in this journey… all good for heart, head and soul.

**How to get back into the huddle**

1. **Go for the squeeze play**

For those close to you, hug ‘em more and longer. You’ll be surprised how they respond and how you feel. If they give the stink eye (and I don’t think they will), just tell them some doctor who wrote a book says it’s healthy to hug. That should be enough.

1. **Get closer to the action**

With acquaintances, expand the number that you greet with a hug, or shake hands a bit longer, or put a hand on their shoulder, even a high five. I guarantee you that it will be well received. If you’ve been a standoff kind of dude, it may shake them up at first, but I think that’s a good thing.

1. **Pay attention to the magic touch**

Wherever you do touch, pay attention. Don’t be just thinking about when to break or how uncomfortable you might feel at first. Focus on the physical contact: what’s happening with the other person, and to you? This goes for life in general … be more mindful … because you get a lot more out of life when you’re not absent.

1. **Don’t be offside**

If you’re just meeting someone, particularly a woman, make sure the hug or touching is OK by asking or reading her body language. This is just being respectful. Some people have had some bad experiences that they’re working through, and you don’t need to throw salt into that wound.

1. **Seek out huddles**

Look for the sanctioned opportunity to get physical. Games, parties, dancing, athletics all offer easy opportunities to feel part of a community or closer to another member of the breed. And remember, animals may be another breed but like us, most respond to a kind touch.

So, get in touch with your hunter-gather self. “Tao” roughly means “the way.” Get those healthy juices flowing. I guarantee you it’s the way to feeling better and to being more connected to those in your life. Trust me, I’m a doctor…

**Recommendations:**

* Mindful of handshakes and the like (Don’t push it.)
* Hugs
* Animals
* The WAY