

Hugs

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2021 is here. It's been a rocky start. Expletives of dismay, exasperation, despair, disgust, and fear fill the airwaves of personal conversations, social media posts, newspaper articles and televised broadcasts. Surely there will be thoughtful and important analyses of the vaccine's slow and fragmented rollout, the new strain of the virus, and the political test of American democracy.



[Photo Credit](#)

But first, a hug.

1. Hugs. Sometimes when stress is high, words fail us. Hugs can help. A hug transcends language and creates connection and closeness. It reminds us of the bonds that tie us together. Hugs convey friendship, kinship, companionship, and relationship. Hugs confer tenderness, warmth, affection, and love. Hugs signal protection, safety, and security. Hugs are an act of openness, inclusion, trust and goodwill. I treasure the process of finding the words that enable me to express myself. I am glad I can help patients of mine in psychotherapy do the same. But sometimes it takes time to find the right words, and in those moments, hugs may provide precisely what our words cannot.

2. Hugs on the brain. Human touch activates our orbitofrontal cortex, an area of the brain linked to compassion and reward. Hugs lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and increase levels of [oxytocin](#) (a feel-good hormone also known as “the cuddle chemical”) and activate our [endogenous opioid system](#) (neurons in the brain that can produce soothing chemicals). We see similar effects in various animal studies, including [Harlow's classic research](#) on attachment. In these studies, infant rhesus monkeys were presented with two inanimate surrogate mothers - one was a simple construction of wire and wood, and the second was covered in foam rubber and soft terry cloth. Across a range of experimental conditions, the infant monkeys consistently demonstrated a preference for the cloth mother, even when the wire mother had the milk they needed to survive. When only the wire mother had food, the babies fed from it and immediately returned to cling to the cloth surrogate.

3. Hugs on the heart. Hugs can also be good for your heart by lowering blood pressure, which helps calm cardiovascular stress. A [2014 study](#) of 59 women, aged 20-49, found that more frequent affectionate contact (e.g., hugs, holding hands) was correlated with a less stressed state as measured by higher oxytocin levels and lower blood pressure and heart rates. The relationship between elevated stress levels and cardiovascular disease is [well documented](#). Given these links, it is possible that physical touch, including hugs, help explain why people with strong social and emotional support systems are at reduced risk for heart disease.

4. Hugs on our immune system. Hugs can strengthen our immune systems by increasing oxytocin, lowering

plasma levels of thyroid stress hormones and decreasing inflammation. A [study](#) of over 400 adults found that hugging was associated with a reduced risk of getting sick (of course, that was pre-COVID and today, we would need to wear a mask). And among individuals who did get sick, more hugging was associated with higher levels of perceived social support, and greater social support predicted less severe illness symptoms. The [data](#) suggest that hugging may be an important component of how perceived social support protects against the pathogenic effects of stress.

5. Hugs on our mental health. Hugs are associated with a multitude of mental health benefits, including [improving mood](#), [reducing fear and anxiety](#), [attenuating the negative psychological impact of interpersonal conflict](#), [decreasing feelings of loneliness and isolation](#), and [enhancing our sense of belonging](#). By reducing cortisol levels, hugs calm us physically and emotionally and counteract the deleterious effects of stress, which can adversely impact memory and verbal reasoning capabilities. Hugs (as a form of physical touch) are vital to promoting healthy psychological development in children, making them feel loved and supported, modeling a strategy for emotional regulation, and potentially setting them up for a less-stressed adulthood.

Michelangelo said, "To touch can be to give life." These are stressful times. We have a lot of work to do to make 2021 the year that we were hoping for. As we make our way, may we all know the healing powers of a good hug. A hug to help us find the right words. A hug to help us center ourselves. A hug to improve our mood and reduce our anxiety. A hug to create connection with one another and imagine a better future together.