

Expressing love can improve your health

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After giving a talk at a university in Texas, Kory Floyd received an unusual request from an audience member. The young man asked for a prescription for the health booster Floyd had discussed in his presentation.

It was an odd question, given that Floyd isn't a medical doctor; he holds a doctorate in communication. And the treatment the young man wanted a prescription for was no pill or potion – it was kissing!

Floyd is a professor in the Hugh Downs School of [Human Communication](#) at Arizona State University. He studies the relationship between affectionate communication and [physical health](#). During his talk in Texas, Floyd discussed a study in which he found that kissing can

lower [cholesterol levels](#), decrease stress and increase [relationship satisfaction](#).

"This young man was really intrigued by the kissing study. He was going to go home and tell his wife all about it. He said, 'Well, you're a doctor. Write a prescription and say that for my health it's very necessary that I get kissed a whole lot more,'" says Floyd. "I said, 'Well, I'm not that kind of doctor, but I'll write the prescription. See what it does.'"

Kissing isn't the only way to boost your health. Floyd and other researchers have found that communicating our [positive feelings](#) for others through words or actions offers a wide range of health benefits. These include lower [stress hormones](#), lower cholesterol, [lower blood pressure](#) and a stronger immune system.

Floyd notes that these benefits happen when affection is expressed, not merely felt. And affection can be expressed in many ways, all of which are good for you. You can say "I love you," write a letter, send a text to say "I'm thinking about you," give a hug, kiss, hold hands, snuggle, or even do a favor that shows you care – such as finishing that chore your partner hates.

"One of the things I give as an example of the link between affection and health is the way you feel when you're having a really horrible day, and everything's going wrong. And in the midst of that stressful day, you see somebody that you care about and they put their arms around you and give you a hug," he says. "That hug may not change anything about what's going bad in your day, but it can change everything about the way you feel in that moment. It feels like all of your stress is just melting away."

These benefits of affection apply not just to the person receiving the affection but also to the person giving it. In fact, you can get a health

boost from expressing affection even if the receiver doesn't reciprocate.

Much of Floyd's research focuses on the stress response – that "fight or flight" reaction that can save us in times of disaster, but on a chronic level can contribute to heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, digestive disorders and more.

In his lab, Floyd can induce and measure the stress response in his subjects. In one study, he found that writing a letter expressing feelings of affection lowered people's stress levels back to normal faster than simply thinking about a loved one, journaling, meditating or doing nothing.

"That started to get us thinking about whether we would be able to find group differences between people who reported higher amounts of affection in their lives, as opposed to people who don't," says Floyd.

"What does this mean for people who have a comparatively high level of affection in their close relationships? Do they also have differences in, say, their ability to react to stressors?"

To find out, Floyd surveyed people to measure the affection levels in their daily lives. [Take the survey for yourself.] Then he brought them into the lab to induce a stress response and measure its intensity.

He found that the highly affectionate people didn't have as strong of a stress response as their less affectionate peers. For example, they didn't produce as much cortisol, and their blood pressures didn't spike as high. Being affectionate seems to offer protection against the effects of stress.

The key may be the hormone oxytocin, often known as "the bonding hormone" because it is released during activities such as sex, childbirth and breastfeeding. It is also released during nonsexual affectionate touch.

"Oxytocin's effects on the body are primarily ones of calming, of warmth. It's very much a feel-good hormone," explains Floyd.

In one study, Floyd and his colleagues showed that people with more affection in their lives release more oxytocin during stress than people with very little affection. This may explain why affectionate people don't get as stressed out as others.

Now, Floyd is moving beyond asking how affection affects the body, and asking why. He is exploring the genetic underpinnings of human affection and asking why some people are naturally more affectionate than others.

"To me, I go back to the very first human relationship that any of us ever has, and that's with our mothers, the person who gives birth to us, who obviously has a vested interest in our survival," he says.

He lists behaviors that a mother uses to protect and nurture her infant: holding, covering, nursing, rocking. Floyd believes these fundamental behaviors morphed into the affectionate behaviors we see in adults, such as hugging.

"These behaviors, at least nonverbally, come out of our most fundamental survival needs," he says. In prehistoric times, before the advent of baby food, mothers even pre-chewed food to give their babies. Floyd says that as gross as that may seem today, it might be the precursor to kissing. Chew on that idea for a while!

"When I think about the ability of an affectionate act to soothe us and ameliorate our stress, I think about it as an example of a survival behavior. So that's my theoretic picture of why affection is something that we do in the first place, where it came from, why we value it, and why we feel like we suffer when we don't get enough," Floyd says.

If we evolved to be affectionate, and it offers so many [health benefits](#), why are some of us less affectionate than others? Certainly, environment plays a role. Research shows that people who are raised in affectionate families are more likely to be affectionate. And there are regional differences in terms of how people choose to express affection. These differences occur over time, as well. Floyd notes how the portrayal of affection on television has evolved drastically over the last few decades.

"What you see men do on TV today – hugging each other, for instance – you never saw Ward Cleaver do that," he notes.

But Floyd wanted to know if there was more than environment involved. Because his earlier research showed a strong link between affection and oxytocin, he decided to look at oxytocin receptor genes. He will be presenting his results at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association in London this June.

He found that variations in one of these genes predicted variation in people's levels of affection. This effect was extremely pronounced in people who had low attachment security.

Attachment security is a person's level of security in personal relationships. People with high attachment security don't worry about abandonment or, conversely, fear that they will lose themselves in their relationships. People with low attachment security, however, feel these fears acutely.

People who have low attachment security and this particular genetic variation were generally less affectionate than people without the variation. They were also less affectionate than highly secure people with the variation.

"And so another way of saying it is that we found a gene-by-environment

interaction. There was a genetic effect on the oxytocin receptor gene, but it was modified by people's attachment security, which is an environmental variable," Floyd explains. Although Floyd notes this is only one gene among many that may influence affectionate behavior, he and his team believe the finding helps illustrate the link between genetics and social behavior.

The gene in Floyd's study is also associated with other traits related to affection, such as empathy and altruism. The ASU scientist is currently working with people in careers where the ability to communicate affection and empathy are critical, such as nursing or counseling.

Over the past couple of years, he has worked with medical residents at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix on developing empathy and empathy communication. The residents practice on a simulated patient – a dummy controlled by a nurse who can talk to the doctor and manipulate vital signs like heart rate. The dummy also wears a video camera on its head, so the doctors can see how they appear to their patients.

"So we sit in a room afterwards and watch the video, and I'll stop the tape at different points and say, 'Look at what you are all doing.' Invariably every one of them is standing at the foot of the patient's bed with their arms crossed and a scowl on their face," he says. "And I say, 'What does this look like from the patient's point of view? How easy would it be for you to not scowl, and stand there with your arms pleasantly folded in front of you?' It's just that they're not aware of their behavior."

The experience makes him wonder about who is most likely to be aware of their behavior naturally, and who is most inclined to learn those skills through training. He wants to find out if there are more effective ways to train doctors, and others, to improve their bedside manner.

Next spring, Floyd is taking a sabbatical at Stanford Medical School to continue his work. This time, he'll genotype medical students to find out what kind of receptor genes they possess. He will connect this information with their natural or learned ability to show empathy to patients and families.

"I'm hoping we'll be able, over time, to help educators better understand the behavioral side of empathy and affection and just showing a patient and their family that you care. Because I know that doctors do care. It just doesn't always dawn on them to display it," he says.

Floyd's work has received attention outside the clinical setting, as well. He was invited to be a consultant on the "Million Moments of Touch" advertising campaign for Nivea, the skin care company, in 2012. He supplied talking points and conducted additional research for the company, which extolled the many benefits of touching.

"Basically getting people to touch more and use their products to make them more touchable," Floyd says.

The company enlisted Dr. Drew, a medical doctor, as their celebrity spokesperson. Floyd recalls feeling amazed when he saw Dr. Drew on a talk show with Joan Rivers discussing the benefits of touch.

"It was this absolutely surreal moment because I realized I had scripted this entire interview. It's wild when you turn on the TV and you see Joan Rivers speaking your words!" he says. "Dr. Drew did a marvelous job. He made it understandable but not dumbed down. I never in a million years would have thought of that as a way to get the message out about the importance of [affection](#), but it did. It was a lot of fun, too!"

How affectionate are you? [Take the quiz and find out.](#)

Provided by Arizona State University

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