

Touch creates a healing bond in health care

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In contemporary health care, touch – contact between a doctor's hand and a patient – appears to be on its way out. The expanding role of CT and MRI imaging is decreasing reliance on touch as a way of making diagnoses. Pressures to move patients through the system more quickly leave health professionals with fewer opportunities to make contact. Our experience suggests that when doctors spend fewer [minutes](#) with patients, less time is available for touch.

Yet despite the rise of scanners, robots and other new medical technologies, the physician's hand remains one of medicine's most valuable diagnostic tools. Touch creates a human bond that is particularly needed in this increasingly hands-off, impersonal age. Medical practice is replete with situations where [touch](#) does more than any words to comfort and reassure.

The USC psychologist Leo Buscaglia, whose habit of hugging those he met soon earned him the sobriquet "Doctor Love," bemoaned our neglect of touch in his book, "[Love.](#)" in these terms:

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.

For thousands of years, touch has been recognized as an essential part of the healing arts. Native American [healers](#) relied on touch to draw out sickness, and kings and queens were long believed to possess the "[Royal Touch.](#)" through which the mere laying on of hands could heal. The Bible contains numerous stories of the healing power of touch.

Touch is an essential part of our well-being

An indication of our need for touch can be found among our primate relatives. [Psychologists](#) have observed that many such species spend upwards of five hours of each day touching one another, partly through grooming. For many human beings, however, the daily dose of touching would be measured not in hours but minutes, perhaps even seconds.

Lack of touch can be hazardous to health. In experiments with primates some 60 years ago, researcher [Harry Harlow](#) demonstrated that young monkeys deprived of touch did not grow and develop normally. Mere food, water and shelter are not sufficient – to thrive, such creatures need

to touch and be touched.

The same can be said for human beings. During the 20th century, wars landed many babies in orphanages, where their [caretakers](#) observed that no matter how well the infants were fed, they would fail to thrive unless they were held and cuddled on a frequent basis. Touch offers no vitamins or calories, yet it plays a vital role in sustaining life.

More recent studies have corroborated these findings. "[Kangaroo care](#)," using papoose-like garments to keep babies close to their mothers, decreases the rate at which they develop blood infections. Touching also improves weight gain and decreases the amount of time that newborns need to remain in the hospital.

Touch creates a bond between doctor and patient

Novelist and physician Abraham Verghese has argued that touching is one of the most important features of the patient-physician interaction. When he examines a patient, he is not merely collecting information with which to formulate a diagnosis, but also establishing a bond that provides comfort and reassurance.

The notion that touch can reassure and comfort has a scientific basis. Ten years ago [researchers](#) used MRI scans to look at the brains of women undergoing painful stimuli. When subjects experience pain, certain areas of the brain tend to "light up." The researchers studied subjects when they were alone, when they were holding a stranger's hand, and when they were holding their husband's hand.

They found the highest levels of pain activation when the women were alone. When they were holding a stranger's hand, the pain response was decreased. And levels of activation were lowest of all when they were holding their husband's hand. Interesting, the higher the quality of

subjects' marriages, the more pain responses were blunted.

Touch from parents helps kids in intensive care

We have been studying this phenomenon in our own institution, looking at the effect of touch not only on patients but on the parents of patients admitted to the pediatric intensive care unit.

The project, called ROSE ([Reach Out, Soothe, and Embrace](#)), sought to determine whether increasing opportunities to touch patients could promote parent well-being without compromising patient safety.

Instead of merely determining whether patients could be taken off the ventilator or fed, we also identified patients who could be safely touched and even held in their parents' arms. When a patient was deemed safe to hold, a magnet bearing the image of a red rose embraced by two hands was placed on the door to the patient's room.

While we are still analyzing the results and further study is needed to fully delineate the health benefits of touch, several findings are already clear.

First, increasing opportunities for touch does not compromise [patient safety](#). Second, the subjective well-being of family members is enhanced when touching is encouraged. Third, promoting touch empowers family members to become more involved in their child's care.

To be sure, inappropriate and unsafe touching can be harmful. But when touch is encouraged in the right ways and for the right reasons, it is good for patients, family, friends and [health professionals](#) alike. Touch is one of the most fundamental and effective ways to create a sense of connection and community among human beings.

In the words of the 20th-century theologian Henri Nouwen, who wrote in his book, "[Out of Solitude](#)":

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.

So next time you find yourself confronted by a person in distress, remember the power of touch. Medicines and words both have healing power, but so does touch, and it is perhaps the most widely available, financially responsible and safest tool in the healing arts. When we touch, we connect, and when we connect, we create a healing bond for which there is simply no substitute.

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