

Gentle touch can decrease stress

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Credit: Swedish Research Council

Long lasting gentle touch decreases stress hormones and decelerate heart beat frequency. It also activates brain areas commonly linked to reward. These research results are presented in a new thesis from the University of Gothenburg. Findings that can be useful in designing therapies to help people relax.

A [gentle touch](#) is comforting for most people, is perceived as pleasurable and alleviates stress. What actually produces this wellbeing, and what happens in the brain when the body is caressed gently, has been the focus for Chantal Triscoli's thesis. In a series of laboratory experiments, involving all in all 125 participants, she has studied the effects of touch using a brush on the forearm. She found that gentle touch not only was perceived as pleasant over a long time, but it also had a decreasing effect on [stress hormones](#) and a deceleration of heart beat.

"One hypothesis we had was that the body would become used to the touch, reaching satiety, and thus should the positive effects decrease over time. But what I found was the opposite," Chantal Triscoli says.

Chantal Triscoli conducts [basic research](#), adding to the knowledge about how the healthy nervous system works. In one of the experiments, she could show how different parts of the brain, i.e. reward-related networks and networks for processing the discriminatory features of touch, are activated by brush stroking a person's forearm.

Though basic research, Chantal Triscoli's findings also can be useful in applied science, i.e. on a more clinical level.

"I can see that touch might be helpful in several types of therapy; for example in stress treatments and for helping people in anxiety states to relax," she says.

"And when treating illnesses it is first necessary to understand how a healthy brain works," she concludes.

More information: Hedonic, neural, and autonomic responses to prolonged gentle touch. gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/54905

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