

Hugs and kisses: Research connects affection, attachment style and marriage satisfaction

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Credit: Lynn Greyling/Public Domain

Go ahead: Give your partner a hug or cuddle while you catch some Netflix. According to recently published research from Binghamton University, State University of New York, it just might build a stronger relationship.

The study, led by Binghamton University doctoral student in psychology Samantha Wagner, particularly looks at the effects of non-sexual intimate touch—for example, hugging, holding hands or cuddling on the couch, rather than actions intended to lead to sex. Attachment style refers to human social bonds and exists on a spectrum; avoidant individuals prefer more interpersonal distance, while [anxious individuals](#) seek greater closeness. This style develops in childhood, but can change over time and vary with the individual in question.

"It all depends on how open, close and secure you feel with that person, which is impacted by many, many factors," Wagner said.

To determine the connection of [attachment style](#), touch satisfaction and marital satisfaction, researchers used a sample of 184 couples over the age of 18, consisting of husbands and wives; same-sex couples were excluded. Because the study protocol included hormonal sampling, individuals on hormonal therapy were also excluded, as well as postmenopausal, pregnant or breastfeeding women. They were interviewed separately on their attachment tendencies, the amount of touch and routine [affection](#) in their relationships, and their relationship satisfaction.

Researchers expected to find that avoidant individuals preferred less touch, while anxious people prefer more. What they found was more nuanced.

The more routine affection that couples experienced, the more they felt satisfied with their partners' touch, even if they had avoidant attachment styles. With low levels of physical affection, anxious husbands were less satisfied with the touch they received, but not anxious wives, who may instead choose to solicit the missing affection.

For men, higher levels of routine affection are associated with

relationship satisfaction; in other words, touch is a positive, the icing on the marriage cake. For women, lower levels of routine affection correlated with relationship dissatisfaction, meaning that touch is an essential ingredient and its absence is a negative. It's a subtle distinction.

"There's something specific about touch satisfaction that interplays with relationship satisfaction but not dissatisfaction for wives," said Wagner, who noted that further research studies may be able to clarify the distinction.

Whatever a couple's attachment insecurities, the perception of how their partner touches them has the greatest association with "touch [satisfaction](#) ." In other words, more is better because they can more easily see that their partner is trying to engage with them.

Overall, the study shows an association between non-sexual physical affection and solid marriages, although the current data can't establish cause and effect.

"Interestingly, there's some evidence that holding your partner's hand while you're arguing de-escalates the argument and makes it more productive," said Wagner, who has used the technique with clients.

However, Wagner emphasized that the study focused only on healthy, consensual touch—not manipulation or abuse. Touch holds different meanings for people, she pointed out; someone with [autism spectrum disorder](#) may be overwhelmed by tactile sensitivity, and someone with a history of trauma may experience touch as aversive.

Wagner is, by her own admission, a hugger and has long been fascinated by the healing possibilities of touch; she wrote her senior thesis as a qualitative review of the uses and benefit of touch across the lifespan. But questions continued to arise: Why do some people enjoy touch more

than others? And do they benefit more as a result?

As the coronavirus pandemic continues, couples may want to consider adding more affection to decrease stress—as long as their partners are receptive and willing.

"Feel free to give some extra snugs on the couch. There's plenty of evidence that suggests touch as a way to decrease stress," she said.

But she notes that the coronavirus pandemic also may lead to [touch](#) deprivation, as social distancing keeps us physically apart from one another. Consider, for example, healthcare workers who are quarantining themselves from their own families when they return home, to keep the virus from spreading to their loved ones.

"I think we should all hold the loved ones we can a little closer and be thoughtful of the struggles that others might be having because they can't do just that," she said. "If anything is true for me, a hug has become even more precious than it was before."

More information: Samantha A. Wagner et al, Touch me just enough: The intersection of adult attachment, intimate touch, and marital satisfaction, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0265407520910791](#)

Provided by Binghamton University

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