

## **Touch-The Common Denominator in Healing**

### **By Ruby Gibson**

Touch is an essential form of communication. Just as words convey what we are thinking, our touch expresses how we are feeling. Touch is simply coming into relationship. When we touch, we define who we are and allow ourselves to make contact - and it is this contact that perpetuates our species. When we are being touched, we come into relationship not only with the person who is touching us, but with ourselves. Touch reflects to us our ability to relate, to be intimate, to receive nurturing, and to take in support; it delineates our boundaries and exposes our sense of personal respect.

Touch is also interpreted in many ways and may signal a variety of responses, dependent upon the quality of the touch and the intention of the person who is touching you. Interpretation of touch may be dependent upon many factors: the temperature of the hands, the pressure, how much surface of the hand makes contact, the speed in which you are approached, the intention behind the touch, etc. These factors, coupled with the receiver's touch history, will determine how the touch is interpreted. This means that touch overlaps somatic sensors and seeps into the emotional and cognitive fields.

Touch can be a very powerful tool. Whether we are cuddling an infant, shaking hands with a friend, stroking a lover or brushing up against a stranger, the intention of anyone's touch is immediately apparent through contact. Thoughts, emotions, authenticity, and your essence - all these are accessible through touch.

Your response to touch can change from moment to moment depending upon how you are feeling, who is touching you, what's happening around you, etc. When you are touched in a healthy, caring manner, you experience trust, and consequently acceptance and bonding occur. But what happens when you receive touch that is violent, cruel or inappropriate? The signals you interpret can carry with them shame, distrust and fear.

Our beliefs about touch begin as children. We inherit the ways in which our caretakers and community make contact with us. There is an implied collective responsibility to touch our children lovingly and with respect, yet as a whole, our society is distrustful of touch. With the unfortunate dilemma of abusive and violent touch directed toward children, the anger and fear inherent in abuse is embodied by our youth. As they grow, each contact can remind them of their history. Hence, there are times when people reject the very thing that could ease their pain.

Children come to the earth open, receptive and dependent upon touch. Without it they will not survive. With any contact they receive, passionate or not, they will siphon the necessary emotional content needed to maintain their existence. Contact and physical nurturing that is abundant with caring and gentleness, that contains the important ingredients of love and acceptance, will feed the soul and establish a foundation of self perception from which this person will grow into adulthood. The signals transmitted within this type of touch tell the soul that it is wanted, notify the mind that it is safe to be here, create a fertile environment for the maturation of the emotional state, and support the body in its unhindered growth and health.

But what happens when a child is brought into relationship with a parent or caregiver that harbors unresolved issues? Even though the contact may appear kind and gentle, it may be sterile. The gesticulation may be interpreted as, I am touching you, but I am not with you. This type of touch may be given by a young parent who holds her baby yet dreams of being elsewhere; or possibly, I am holding you, but I resent every minute of it. These types of vacant touching, especially received as a young child, signal the body to retract, the mind to question the conflicting messages, the emotions to parch and the soul to play hide and seek. The caregiver may usually not even be aware of the inconsistency of their touch, for they are busy attending to their own needs or concerns.

When the touch is of a violent nature, it may be riddled with intense emotions and verbal slandering. Hitting, slapping, pinching, spanking and physical torture not only carry the physical pain and scars, but with it the onslaught of the internalized feelings of the aggressor. The language that the abuser's hands speak is fluent to the heart, transferring the emotional and mental havoc inwardly to the victim, predisposing them to heightened fear and numbing of sensation.

The history of the aggressor compounds the affect of the touch. Parents and caregivers who were physically abused as children and continue to somatically carry their pain may sometimes pass on the legacy with contact with their children. Consequently, the signals that the child receives from violent touch are: cognitively that it is not okay for my parent to be here so it is not okay for me to be here; somatically they sense that the parent hurts physically so that means that I must hurt; emotions are outbursts that seem to

only cause pain, so I better keep mine in; and the soul not only questions its ability to be here, it knows that it is not safe to be here now. The overall message that is construed from this type of touch is that because my parents are like this and I am like this, this is how it must be. Here they lose hope and resign themselves on many levels to minimize their existence. Their dreams, ambitions and compassion are smothered because the fuel of excitement for passion about life is gone. Touch can be a very dangerous tool.

Touch can also be a very manipulative tool. When caregivers use touch in a sexually suggestive or exploitive manner, they are taking advantage of the innocent nature of children to meet their own needs. All abusive touch contains the element of power, the perpetrator seeking to control some, or all, aspects of a child's body and psyche for the purpose of humiliation, sexual satisfaction or dominance. Touch that is provocative in nature can send many confusing signals, always dependent upon the history and perversion of the perpetrator. Generally, this type of touch teaches the child physically that their body is not their own and thus they grow to abuse it, emotionally they decipher that they are worthless, cognitively they learn how to manipulate others and their soul seeks invisibility.

If you, as a child, adolescent or adult, have received polluted touch, many aspects of yourself may continue to carry the after effects. Once the touch beliefs have been encoded in your body, they tend to dominate your physical health, your emotional freedom, your mental attitude and your spiritual creativity. You begin to establish a concept about reality and therefore limit your ability to experience life in a new or different way. Many of us may have lived with our history haunting us for many, many years. It is important to recognize that we are not what has happened to us. We are much more. Defining yourself according to the past will never allow you to grow into the vibrant person you were born to be.

Touch can also be a very healing tool. Healthy touch can repair the impact that unhealthy touch has had on you. The common denominator in all healthy forms of touch is love. When someone touches you lovingly, joyfully, compassionately or affectionately they are honoring your existence and drawing you closer to your potential. They are reflecting back to you the possibility that exists within for movement and change. They are communicating to you that it is safe to be here. With all healthy touch you learn that you are wanted.

Healing your past is very fundamental. Begin by adjusting the manner in which you touch others. Start to recognize when someone is receptive to touch and when they are repelled by touch. Clues that someone is receptive to touch are: that they keep eye contact with you; that their breathing slows and deepens; that they adjust their body in your direction; that they smile or sigh appreciatively. Developing sensitivity to other's needs will greatly enhance your ability to recognize your own.

Our histories, our cultures and our societies determine the types of touch that are appropriate and the frequency of contact that we give and receive. But all of this is open to interpretation. Just because you were raised in a home where hugs were rare, doesn't mean that you have to live your adult life in the same manner. Change those things that don't work for you in regards to touch. Ask for a hug when you feel you need one. Get a massage from someone you trust when you need nurturing. Breathe deeply into those areas of your body that seem foreign or off-limit.

Learning to love your body is the first step in valuing yourself. Your body is the vehicle you were given for this life, and it requires care and maintenance. Support yourself by recognizing your vulnerability and only allowing those whom you trust to touch your body.