
The science behind the hug

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First of all, touch is your first language. When you came out of your mum's tummy, you had a lot of learning to do and the tiny version of you learned through touch. Skin on skin contact in the very early years seems especially crucial. A hug enhances attachment between parent and child; it can be nuanced to signify undivided love (*"You're safe; I'm here"*) or comfort (*"Your hurt, but everything's OK now."*)

Hugging stimulates the production of oxytocin, a neurotransmitter that acts on the brain's emotional centre. It promotes feelings of contentment and reduces anxiety and stress as well as promoting feelings of devotion, trust and bonding. But there's more! Mum's touch even seems to mitigate pain – remember when you were a child and you fell down and grazed your knee? A loving hug made it all go away.

Some research indicates that hugging releases hormones that are immunoregulatory, having a deep impact on the health of our immune systems. Hugging releases dopamine, another wonderful chemical that can help stave off depression and Parkinson's. Dopamine changes how our bodies handle stress, both physical and social.

If you're hugged and loved at an early age, it massively enhances the chances of you becoming a well-balanced and loving adult. So if you want to do something for future generations, hug them and hold them when they're little.

It's important to hug our elders too. Physical touch and hugging can combat feelings of loneliness that arise as people get older. A retirement home in New York conducted a study in which they implemented a program called 'Embraceable You' which encouraged cross-generational contact and touch between residents and staff members in order to improve the residents' wellbeing. The results were conclusive - residents who were hugged three or more times a day reported feeling more energetic, less depressed, better able to concentrate and got more restful sleep than their less-hugged counterparts.

It's remarkable that this complex surge of events in the brain and body are all initiated by a simple, supportive touch. Regardless of your touchy-feely preference level, hugging can convey a message that words often can't so be sure to give and get your quota of hugs.

National Hugging Day merely brings our focus to something that is simple and free. It acts as a reminder that hugging is for every day.