
The Hour for Hugs

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The yearend is approaching and with it, the customary hugs between Cubans.

However, this habit is not accepted everywhere on the planet. There are cultures, especially in Africa, Asia and the Arab world, where displays of affection like this are not well regarded, and are even punishable by law.

This is the case in Qatar, India, Nepal, Japan, Thailand, Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates, for example. In some of them, hugging in public, kissing and even shaking hands can lead to jail or deportation if you are a foreigner.

But for Cubans it's more than usual to give and receive hugs all the time: between relatives, partners, friends, neighbors... and even between strangers. Greeting, thanking, saying goodbye, comforting, protecting and loving are verbs that often come with hugs here.

It's not that we know it for sure, it's simply in our idiosyncrasy, almost in our DNA, but with this habit we are also protecting our health and even healing.

I hug you, I heal you

There are many investigations that confirm the healing power of hugs, for the mind and also for the body.

A recent investigation published this year in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour* confirms this. It's a systematic review and meta-analysis of a total of 212 investigations on the importance of caresses, hugs included, which included the participation of almost 13 thousand subjects.

This study confirmed that physical interventions – and hugs are among them – are the most appropriate to reduce pain, depression and anxiety in adults and children, as well as to increase weight gain in newborns.

They also found that the older people are, the greater the benefits, through touch, for systolic blood pressure.

Although they did not detect substantial differences in the effects caused by hugs and other touching expressions by gender, they did identify that, in the case of women, the buffering effects of hugs against physiological stress were greater compared to men.

Dr. Julian Packheiser, a neuroscientist at the German Ruhr University of Bochum and leader of that study, summarized that the group of researchers found solid evidence of the health benefits in adults who practiced physical contact with other human beings.

“Consent is essential to improve symptoms of pain, anxiety and depression in humans. If there is a desire for contact, we can only advise that interactions such as hugs or massages be incorporated more into therapeutic contexts to alleviate these feelings,” said the expert and stressed that this study “is important because touch interventions can be a very powerful tool to improve the well-being of the general population.”

The neuroscientist asserts that “Massages, hugs or caresses seemed to be equally effective. The duration of the caress is not important either, but its frequency is”

Also Nazaret Castellanos, doctor in Neuroscience Medicine, from the Complutense University of Madrid, master in Computational Neuroscience, Anatomy and Histology, also a graduate in Theoretical Physics and author of several books on neuroscience, more than supports the importance of hugs.

In an interview for a digital website, the professor and scientific disseminator also ratifies when commenting on the communication between the brain and the rest of the body, that it's not only very beneficial to accept hugs, but also to ask for them and to be aware that we are hugged.

Castellanos elaborated on this regard about “the need to receive affection explicitly”, because it is not only necessary to have been told I love you since there's the capacity to forget and what someone takes for granted is not always understood that way by the other party.

Hence, it's important to receive hugs also as a way of reminder of love “because remembering is returning to the heart, and remembering comes from the Latin *Re - Cordis*, to go through the heart again.”

For this reason, hugging is also related to cardiovascular health since feeling loved and feeling joy improves what's called cardiac flexibility, increasing the variability of the heartbeat frequency. “And if on top of that I am aware that I am loved and that I feel joy, the improvement is even greater. It's one of the great foods for the heart,” says the renowned expert.

More benefits of hugging

Greater Good magazine published by the University of California center and dedicated to the psychology, sociology and neuroscience of well-being reminds us that touch consists of two different systems: the “fast touch,” a system of nerves that allows us to quickly detect contact (a fly that lands on the arm, the warmth of a surface) and the “slow touch,” a set of recently discovered nerves, called c-tactile afferents, that process the emotional meaning of touch.

The latter have evolved into the so-called “hug nerves,” which are activated by a very specific type of stimulation: a gentle touch at skin temperature, typical of a hug or a caress.

They are the gateway for neuronal entry to the rewarding and pleasurable signals of tactile social interactions, such as hugs.

According to this publication, touch is the first sense that begins to function in the womb around 14 weeks. And from the moment of birth, a mother's gentle caress also works as a health benefit because it helps reduce heart rate and promotes the growth of brain cell connections.

When someone is hugged, the stimulation of the c-tactile afferents in the skin sends signals, through the spinal cord, to the brain's emotion processing networks.

This generates a cascade of neurochemical signals that include the hormone oxytocin, important in social bonds, in reducing heart rate and also stress and anxiety levels.

The release of endorphins in the brain's reward pathways triggers immediate feelings of pleasure and well-being derived from a hug or a caress.

Hugs can improve sleep since high levels of them cause fragmented sleep patterns or insomnia; hugging also reduces stress reactivity and develops resilience; and it could help fight infections because hormones such as oxytocin and cortisol influence the body's immune response.

Soon it will be International Hug Day, on January 21, but these lines talk about hugs because the end of the year is a special fertile ground for hugs to grow and multiply.

Although there's not much to celebrate, although this 2024 that is already leaving leaves few smiles, it's still worth hugging each other to tell each other that we still love and also to reward each other, because we were able to endure so much onslaught.

We are still here, about to tear off the last page of this calendar, repeating along with Eduardo Galeano – who wrote precisely this in his *Book of Embraces* – that “There's only one place where yesterday and today meet and recognize each other and embrace each other, and that place is tomorrow.”

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