

Greenwich Sentinel

Building a Strong Community Together ✦ June 2, 2017

Health and Wellness

Healing Touch

By Julia Chiappetta



This single act can change a life in a second. A gentle touch can heal a soul, warm a heart, bring joy, introduce comfort, offer peace, and demonstrate love without words. Yet many find it to be foreign and uncomfortable. It might be because they never experienced gentleness or had a traumatic experience preventing them from enjoying the benefits of touch. Whatever it may be, this breaks my heart, because they miss out on a great gift.

I remember the missions pastor at my church in Ft. Lauderdale, where I lived for several years, telling a story about how he took a group of missionaries to visit orphanages in Romania. The sole purpose of the trip was to hold babies who were otherwise strapped into their cribs or and had very little human touch. You see, there were many more babies than staff who could tend to them, so the group would travel there for one week or more to hold babies, feed and bathe babies, play with babies and sing them into sweet slumber. Each day, morning, noon and night, they offered arms of safety and love.

The pastor said that you could see the transformation on their faces—the joy in their smiles and the peace in their eyes. I will never forget the night that I heard this story and how I cried, actually sobbed in my car, all the way home thinking... I need to help, how could I help, what should I do? And then I prayed. God answered that prayer soon after, when I

was introduced to a new program started by members of the same church called 4Kids of South Florida. Here the mission was to bring hugs, love, food and shelter to babies; eventually it grew to provide care for kids up to age 18 who had been abused, abandoned and forgotten.

Through generous donations of real estate and resources, they were able to offer homes based on the ages of the kids and build a community love. Each home had house parents who lived in full-time, and one of my girlfriends was a housemother to teenage girls. It was unthinkable for me not to try to do more, so I enrolled for foster parent training until hurricane Katrina destroyed the condo I was renting, and eventually I had to move back to Connecticut.

So back to the beginning, and how a single human touch can bring healing. As a cancer advocate, I see the need for touch more than ever. I see it in the faces of those who are newly diagnosed and felt it myself after hearing the words “you have cancer.” I see it in hospital waiting rooms where fear of diagnostic testing pervades. I have become someone who sees and feels need, with God’s guiding, and find myself often holding a hand or offering a gentle touch. It is superfood for our souls and can change a mind, heart and soul in an instant.

So how can we tap into the body boosting benefits of touch?

According to health.com, “Whether it’s a squeeze of the hand, a big bear hug, a kneading massage, even a bedroom romp, touch is shaping up to be the ultimate mind-body medicine.

“From lowering blood pressure and heart rate to increasing immune function and relieving pain, getting touched or doing some touching makes you healthier—not to mention happier and less anxious.”

Massage: This helps muscles to relax, reduces blood pressure, slows the heart rate and reduces the stress hormone cortisol. When relaxed, our bodies can heal, and we make it easier to reset, and recharge and help us achieve a more robust immune system. “Cortisol suppresses the immune response,” explains Dr. Roberta Lee, vice chair of the Department of Integrative Medicine at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. “Anything that increases the relaxation response triggers the restoration of your immune response.”

Hugging: Also according to health.com, “Embracing floods our bodies with oxytocin, a ‘bonding hormone’ that makes people feel secure and trusting toward each other, it also lowers cortisol levels, and reduces stress. Women who get more hugs from their partners have higher levels of oxytocin, lower blood pressure and heart rates, according to research done at the University of North Carolina.”

Holding a hand: According to Dr. James Coan, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, “When we administered functional MRIs to 16 women while telling them they might experience a mild shock, the resulting anxiety caused the images of their brain activity to light up like Christmas trees. But when the women held hands with one of our experimenters, that stress response subsided and there was a qualitative shift in the number of regions in the brain that just weren’t reacting anymore to the threat cue.”

He continued, “Even more intriguing is that when you’re in a happy relationship, clasping hands reduces stress-related activity in a brain area called the hypothalamus—which lowers the levels of cortisol coursing through your system—as well as in the part of the brain that registers pain, which actually helps keep us from feeling it as much.”

The gift of touch brings healing, so let’s look to offer a gentle touch or hold the hand of a friend who might be sad or burdened. And, don’t forget to take care of your body... Drink a nice organic green juice, take a run or hike on your favorite path, hit the gym for some cross-training, reread a literary classic, and take time to pray and thank God for all the blessings around us. It’s all about love and encouragement!

Julia Chiappetta is the author of “Breast Cancer: The Notebook” (Gemini Media, 2006) and is also the owner of Julia Chiappetta Consulting. She lives in Cos Cob. More information and past columns can be found at JuliaChiappetta.com.

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