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Haptic Communication - The Unspoken Dialogue

Chippy Susan Bobby

Abstract

Touch is the earliest sense which is developed in the foetus. Although a very important form of nonverbal communication, the significance of touch in our lives often goes unnoticed and is very often taken for granted. However, the impact of touch in a person's life is tremendous and can play a vital role in the holistic development of an individual. Thus, touch behavior is very significant because learning them can really improve our communication and help in understanding others. Learning to improve our communication through proper use of touch behaviors will put us in a better position by communicating effectively everywhere we go. Therefore, Haptics is a subject which needs to be explored and understood.

Touch is the Earliest Sense, Taken for Granted

Touch is the earliest sense which is developed in the foetus. Since the largest tissue in our body is our skin, the effect of touch has much impact on our well-being. Although a very important form of non-verbal communication, the significance of touch in our lives often goes unnoticed and is very often taken for granted.

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However, the impact of touch in a person's life is tremendous and can play a vital role in the holistic development of an individual. It's heart-warming to see how a baby responds to its mother's loving touch, which is vital to the normal development and emotional well-being of the child. In the mother's womb, each part of the foetus' body is touched by the amniotic fluid, which may be the origin of the yearning for touch all our lives.

Haptics

Haptics or communication by touch, as it is commonly known, is essential to a person's healthy development. In the early 19th and 20th centuries, many babies died from a disease called Marasmus, which, in Greek meant, wasting away. When researchers tracked down the causes of this disease, they found that many infants suffered from lack of physical contact with parents or nurses rather than poor nutrition, medical care or other factors. From this knowledge, came the practice of mothering children in institutions - picking babies up, carrying them around, and handling them several times a day. Once this practice was started, it was observed that the death rate for infants fell to below 10%.

Touch increases a child's mental functioning as well as physical health. It has been found that babies who have been given plenty of physical stimulation by their mothers have significantly higher risk than those receiving less contact. Contemporary research confirms the value of touch in infants. Premature babies grow faster and gain more weight when massaged.

Healing through Touch

Touch can also boost the immune function of Cancer and HIV patients. If we examine some of our ancient scriptures too, we will find how people were healed through the impact of touch. In the Bible, for instance, several of the miracles performed by Jesus where people were healed reveals the significance of the power of touch. In the New Testament, we read that Jesus brought joy to the blind who went away seeing, to the deaf who went away hearing, and many others who were instantly freed from their ailments. For the lepers, the Bible records thus of Jesus - *'Then He put out His hand and touched him, saying "I am willing; be cleansed". And immediately the leprosy left him'.* (Luke 5:13-The New King James Version, pg. 46)

No Need for Words

The sense of touch communicates without the need for words. Gently stroking a child will induce sleep, soothe pain, and quiet rage. Physical contact informs the other of our presence, our

caring and our support. We hold the person who is grieving. We touch to say Hello," "Good-bye," and "It's OK." A pat on the back signals approval, a slap on the hand says the opposite.

The Skin and Sensory Receptors

As the largest organ of the body, the skin comprises almost one-fifth of the total body weight and engages a major percentage of the operation of the brain. The skin is constantly growing and changing in sensitivity as it performs its many functions: protection, sensation, regulation of temperature, excretion, respiration, and the metabolism and storage of fat.

As the infant takes its first breath, it reaches out to learn what this new world is all about. Sensory receptors located in the skin start picking up enormous quantities of information and sending them to the brain. Pressure, temperature, pain – all carry a message about the environment. Each one adds another dimension to the infant's accumulating experience.

Two Kinds of Touch

Research shows two kinds of touch language - bodily contact and touching with hands. Bodily contact refers to touches that are accidental and unconscious and any part of the body may be involved in it. On overcrowded buses and trains like in India, back pushes or elbow rubbings, stepping on someone else's feet are so common. Touching implies that the actions are deliberate, conscious and are primarily made by hands.

Communicate through Touch

Limiting ourselves to verbal expression cuts us off from the full range of communication. Since touching means closeness, it can help to bridge the distances that separate us from one another. Thus connected, one can communicate better. As we approach others with a hand extended in a gesture of acceptance, we stand a better chance of reaching a mutual understanding.

Thus we communicate a great deal through touch. The messages we give through various tactile gestures could be many-a firm hand shake, a timid tap on the shoulder, a warm bear hug, a reassuring pat on the back, a patronising pat on the head, or a controlling grip on the arm.

Cultural Differences

Every country has a different perception of touch as communication. Haptic customs differ greatly throughout the world. In the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, people greet each

other with one kiss on the cheek. In Spain, people greet each other with two kisses on the cheek. In the United States, the main form of greeting is shaking hands. When meeting someone for the first time, shaking hands is most appropriate. Though when greeting friends it is not uncommon for them to hug.

Other countries have different customs. In Japan, people bow to each other in greeting and think it rude to touch. In Western countries, men and women can walk freely holding each other's hands in public. But in India, Pakistan, and other conservative countries, men and women do not generally do so in public. In India, touch language is restricted to people who know one another and that, at best, is the pat on the shoulder from a senior to a junior or touching both palms together to greet a visitor or a person touching the feet of elderly people to show respect. (Swaroop and Bhagaban, pgs. 190-191)

Touch is an important way to convey warmth, comfort and reassurance. It is so powerful, and it is governed by cultural customs that establish who can touch whom and how in various circumstances. In the U.S. and Great Britain, people usually touch less frequently than people in France or Costa Rica. (Bovee and Thill, pg. 41)

Even within each culture's norms, however, individual attitudes towards touch can vary widely. A manager might be comfortable using hugs to express support or encouragement, but his or her subordinates might interpret those hugs as either show of dominance or sexual interest. This is a complex subject. Touch usually communicates intimacy. However, which part of the body can be touched by whom and when depends on the culture of the people involved. Therefore, one has to be careful while using the touch language so as to avoid misunderstanding.

Unwanted Touching

In contemporary society, unwanted touching is cause for concern, and even legal action. In general, the degree of touch comfort goes along with openness to express intimate feelings, an active interpersonal style, and satisfactory relationships. (Adler, R. B., Rosenfeld pgs. 124-125)

Healthy Touching

However, this form of nonverbal communication is widely used and it is believed that touching and being touched are essential to a healthy life. It serves as an interesting ground for study, and they differ greatly throughout the world. The haptics concept is interpreted differently all over the world and therefore is a subject that needs to be explored and understood. Touch also

plays a part in how we respond to others and to our environment.

Amount of Touching

The amount of touching usually decreases with age. Grown up children touch each other less than younger ones do. Parents touch their older children less often than their younger ones. A hug can be given as an indication of support, comfort, and consolation, particularly where words are insufficient. A hug is usually a demonstration of affection and emotional warmth, sometimes arising out of joy or happiness at meeting someone or seeing someone that they have not seen in a long time. A non-reciprocal hug may demonstrate a problem in the relationship. A hug can range from a brief one-second squeeze, , to an extended holding. The length of a hug in any situation is socially and culturally determined.

Hugging

Hug therapy often creates awareness about a healthy and wholesome habit that is endangered by the bustle of modern life. Tactile contact is very important for people with certain handicaps and can even be therapeutic. It only takes a hug, a heartfelt and warm embrace, to change the lives of others. Reaching out and touching someone, and holding him or her tight, is a way of saying that one cares. Its effects are immediate. It should not be forgotten that the skin is also a sense organ. Therefore, one will realize that both the hugger and the person being hugged feel good.

If we hug a person spontaneously, we show love and affection. If we offer a limp handshake, we show that we are not interested, or are nervous by nature. Although Indians were never averse to touch, especially while expressing grief or joy, urban India seems to be becoming more of a hands-off culture. The hugging or pecking on the cheek we see nowadays at parties is very superficial. Hugging in families, particularly between parents and their grown-up children is something that needs to be cultivated to strengthen family bonding. Hugging breaks the bonds of body as well as of society and brings more warmth in relationships.

Bonding

Touch is an important component of attachment as it creates bonds between two individuals say psychiatrists, hugging is simply a natural expression of show love and care. Cuddling and caressing make the growing child feel secure and is known to aid in self-esteem. The tactile sense is all-important in infants. When a two-year-old cries, to comfort him, one does not philosophize but hold him on one's lap. A baby recognizes its parents initially by touch. Cultural variations

pertaining to hugging: In the West, hugging a friend of the opposite sex is common, while in India you see more physical contact between friends of the same sex.

Touch has come full circle in the West this century. There was a time when parents and hospitals were advised to leave a crying baby alone. Today the paediatricians and psychologists tell us to pick up and cuddle the children. Toys, even teddy bears, whose use has been increasing in the recent decades, are a poor substitute for the human contact needed by children.

Psychoanalysis and Touch

In psychoanalysis, developed early this century, the couch symbolized the distance from the patient that the therapist had to maintain. The taboo against touch was broken in the 1960s and '70s when many psychological counsellors are expanding the definition of "hug" by even patting and massaging their clients in the course of normal therapy. The idea is to add touch to the powers of speech, listening and observation. The argument goes that the client's skin can perceive care and reassurance. Touch increases self-disclosure, verbalisation of psychiatric patients, and also compliance.

Therapeutic Touch

Hugging is being used even as an aid in treating some physical illnesses, following research that it leads to certain positive physiological changes. For example, touch stimulates nerve endings, thereby helping in relieving pain. It is thus not uncommon for a chronic pain patient to be prescribed "Therapeutic touch" which involves placing the hands on or just above the troubled area in the patient's body for half-an-hour. This pushes up the haemoglobin levels in the blood, increasing the delivery of blood to tissues, a study at the nursing department of New York University showed. Some nurses' associations in the USA have since endorsed therapeutic touch.

Any health problem makes the sufferer feel vulnerable, frightened, angry, frustrated and helpless. The patient usually needs to educate himself to make certain life changes. Hugging can give him the positive emotional state necessary to make these changes. In one study, pet ownership was seen to contribute to the survival of heart patients. The inference is that the cuddling of pets has a soothing effect that reduces the stress levels in heart attack victims.

Five Senses and Touch

Kory Floyd, in his book *Interpersonal Communication*, says that touch behaviors are from

our five senses. Learning touch behaviors can improve the understanding of how people are behaving and how they improve themselves communicating non-verbally to others. Non-verbal communication includes affectionate touch, control touch, caregiving, aggressive touch, and ritualistic touch. Each specific touch has its different significant meaning for us to understand better in communicating to those who are unable to understand the language you speak, disable or relational understanding.

Kory Floyd's research focuses on the communication of affection in personal relationships, and on the interplay between communication, physiology and health. He has studied affectionate communication in a host of family relationships, as well as between romantic partners, friends, and new acquaintances. His work in the Communication Sciences Laboratory demonstrates how affectionate behavior can alter stress hormones, lower blood glucose, reduce lipids, and improve immune system parameters. His most recent project, funded by the National Institutes of Health, investigated the role of the peptide hormone oxytocin in the stress-alleviating effects of affectionate communication. (Floyd, K. (2009).)

Touch and Management

Touch can be used very effectively by managers in the work place to provide encouragement such as a pat on the back .Especially after reprimanding an employee, a pat on the back can really change the attitude of the worker toward the work and also improve employer - employee relations. A pat on the back from a superior signifies a job well done and also boosts the morale of the employee to a great extent.

Early Years and After

Among the earliest forms of communication for any human being is touch, and it continues to be very important throughout our early years. Once past this period, however, we are relatively cautious about the use of touch in our culture. Except for the "intimate distance", touch is a rather carefully used means of communication in our society.

Comforting

And yet a touch can often say as much as a lot of words. This is probably most obvious when someone we know is in trouble or in sorrow, taking hold of his or her hand or putting an arm around the shoulder often is much more effective than words. The nearness, the closeness, the touch says that we are ready to help if needed.

Intimate Relationship

Touch is usually reserved for our most intimate relationships and for communication between close friends. Although it is acceptable for women to touch in public, many believe it is not 'proper' for men to do so. Sadly, even in the privacy of the home, a son may be embarrassed when he is embraced by his father. And so, many are a little surprised when we see pictures of men in other countries embracing or walking arm in arm. (leehopkins.com/nonverbal-communication-touch.html)

Alternate Form of Communication

Non-verbal touch behaviors can also be used to understand people who are blind or deaf and also to understand people who speak a different language. Affectionate touch develops better romantic relationships, friendship, and understanding different types of parent-child relationship. Controlling touch should be used in appropriate situations. Touch behaviors are important, such as caregiving, in hospital to understand patients who can't verbally talk and when they are feeling hurt in certain areas, they could motion where they feel pain. Ritual touch varies in cultures. And an aggressive touch can lead to a criminal act.

A Great Deal of Information

How one person touches another communicates a great deal of information. Is a grip gentle or firm, and does one hold the other person on the back of the upper arm, on the shoulder, or in the middle of the back. Is the gesture a push or a tug? Is the touch closer to a pat, a rub, or a grabbing? People have different areas of personal intimacy, and this refers not only to the sexual dimension, but also to the dimension of self-control. Many adolescents are particularly sensitive to any touching that could be interpreted as patronising or undue familiarity (Swaroop and Bhagaban , pg.191)

Even the angle of one's holding another's hand might suggest a hurrying or coercive implicit attitude , or on the other hand, a respective, gentle permission giving approach. Touches that can be defined as communication include handshakes, holding hands, kissing, back slap, high five, shoulder pat, or brushing arm. Each of these gives off non-verbal messages as to the touching person's intentions and feelings. They also cause feelings in the receiver, whether positive or negative. (Swaroop and Bhagaban , pg.191)

Culture and Communication

It is also important to analyse the significance of touch in the context of culture and communication. Not only does verbal communication vary from one culture to another, but also so does nonverbal communication. Touching is no exception. It is important to remember when communicating with people from other countries and other cultures that their nonverbal communications differ from each other just as their languages do. Touching may be a very acceptable and a very common form of nonverbal communication in the country where one is transacting business; one should understand this and be prepared for it. It is important to remember that people communicate in terms of their own experiences. One should keep this in mind while encoding and decoding messages.

Handshake is still a significant social exchange which should not be underrated. It is important to make sure that the handshake is conveying the message that it ought to convey. Form a personal connection with the hand clasp. This is better for sales and social situations than business situations. When shaking hands, take the other hand and use it to cover the back of the person's hand one is shaking. This reinforces an emotional connection and is appropriate when one wants to establish rapport and show sympathy.

A confident, comfortable person uses the hand shake as a positive nonverbal interaction and this is expressed through a firm, dry, confident hand shake. The hand shake should give assurance of the candidate's desire for a positive first interaction and impression. A limp hand shake signals low confidence and low self-esteem. An excessively strong hand shake may reveal that the person is overly aggressive.

(http://humanresources.about.com/od/selectemployees/a/nonverbal_com.htm)

In creating a professional image, the foremost factor that sets the tone for creating a mark is a proper hand shake. One's hand shake is the single most important tool in one's communications tool box. A proper hand shake can smooth the rough waters of the business world and even open new doors of opportunity. (<http://gmagoldie.hubpages.com/hub/Communications-The-Handshake>)

Without learning touch behaviors, communication would be difficult like not having the right conveyance to travel to various places. Learning to improve ourselves in touch behaviors will put us in a better position by communicating effectively everywhere we go.

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