

healing ways



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# AMAZING EMBRACE

## The Healing Power of Hugs

by April Thompson

**H**ugs don't just feel good; they do good. A simple embrace can boost our health and mood, connect us spiritually and even help mend society.

Hugs and other types of affectionate touching can provide numerous benefits in the face of threats or stress, according to Michael Murphy, Ph.D., a researcher with the Laboratory for the Study of Stress, Immunity and Disease at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh. "The research shows that touch behaviors like hugs reduce negative responses to threats and make people feel happier, more secure and more supported."

In a study of 404 adults, Carnegie Mellon researchers looked at how social support and hugs affected participants' susceptibility to the common cold after being exposed to the virus. "People experiencing lots of conflict are more likely to get a cold when exposed to a virus," says Murphy. "But individuals who also tend to receive lots of hugs appear protected from this additional risk."

These behaviors also turn down our biological response to stress and may even improve how our immune system works.

~Michael Murphy, researcher

### A Primal Need for Connection

Mata Amritanandamayi, a 65-year-old Indian spiritual leader better known as Amma, has hugged tens of millions of people around the world, earning her the nickname, "the hugging saint."

Amma's tradition of hugging people grew organically, from hugging someone she noticed in distress, to how she receives massive crowds clamoring for one of her loving, compassionate embraces.

"A hug is a gesture that reveals the spiritual truth that, 'We are not two—we are one,'" says Swami Amritaswarupananda, one of Amma's senior disciples. "In today's world, where people often feel alienated and lonely, a hug can uplift and make us feel reconnected to the people and world around us."

Intention is key to the exchange of energy that occurs with a hug, says Amritaswarupananda. "What is important is the sincerity behind the action—the genuine feeling of love and compassion. A simple glance or mere touch of the hand can have

that same power to make us feel whole if that genuine, heartfelt connection is there.”

Hugs tap into that fundamental human need to belong, says Murphy. “Hugs and other forms of affectionate touch act as powerful reminders that we belong. “These behaviors also turn down our biological response to stress and may even improve how our immune system works.” For example, researchers think that touching might trigger our body to release oxytocin, a hormone that can reduce fear and improve social bonding, Murphy notes. Hugs and the associated oxytocin release can have powerful ripple effects in the body, decreasing heart rate and levels of stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine, along with improving immune function and pain tolerance. Oxytocin can also trigger the release of feel-good hormones like serotonin and dopamine.

## **Bridging Divides With a Hug**

While Murphy cautions that the jury is out on the effects of hugs on strangers, as most research has been done on embraces between loved ones, Ken Nwadike, Jr. has built a national campaign around the concept. Known as the “free hugs guy”, the former competitive runner began offering up hugs during the 2014 Boston Marathon, the year after the deadly bombing. Nwadike has since brought the Free Hugs Project to more divisive spaces, from political rallies to protests, offering hugs to all to spread love and inspire change.

The Los Angeles activist’s all-embracing hugs are a symbol of unconditional love, respect and unity at a time when tensions and political divisions are running high. For Nwadike, hugs are a way of de-escalating conflict and mending the human divide. “Communities are divided because of fear, hatred and misunderstanding. Starting the conversation with kindness, rather than hatred, will get us a lot further,” he says.

Consent is always important, and not everyone appreciates an unsolicited hug. But like compliments, hugs are free to give and usually well received. As humans, we bear arms that were built not to harm, but to heal.

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