Why the touch-deprived can’t wait for Portland’s ‘cuddle shop’

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Touch deprivation is on the rise and can lead to aggression, depression and bad health. No wonder there’s a market for hugs.

"Touch calms the nervous system, lowers blood pressure as well as stress hormones, which in turn means that immune cells can survive." Photograph: Alamy

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Last week a cuddling shop opened in Portland, Oregon, immediately attracting interest from thousands of potential clients drawn to the idea of platonic touch (for $60, for instance, they can purchase an hour of cuddling). The runaway success of the venture may seem surprising, but it’s part of a broader trend - hugging sessions involving groups of people are also becoming popular, and massage therapy is one of the fastest-growing professions in the US.

The reason for this development is that people need to touch and be touched. But unfortunately many are touch-deprived, which can lead to aggression, depression, pain and health problems. An extreme example of touch deprivation can be seen in orphanages where children who receive less physical affection fail to thrive and are developmentally delayed.

I am director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami/Miller School of Medicine, and the studies we have conducted show that touch can reduce aggression, decrease prenatal depression and lower pain in people with arthritis, fibromyalgia, back pain and headaches. It also leads to an increase in the neurotransmitter dopamine, which can explain why there is less aggression in cultures that are more physically...
affectionate, such as France, compared with the US. In one study we compared the way parents touched their small children in playgrounds in Paris and Miami, and how adolescents touched each other in McDonald’s restaurants in those same cities. The French children received more physical affection from their parents and were less physically and verbally aggressive towards their peers in the playground. The French adolescents were also more physically affectionate towards each other and showed less verbal and physical aggression.

Touch deprivation has become commonplace in our world, with mandates against touch happening in school systems from as early as the preschool stage. Teachers are not allowed to touch children, and children are chastised for being affectionate with each other. These policies have been instituted to protect children from bad touch, but child abuse still happens. Adults in the US sue each other for harassment following even accidental touch, and as a result of all this people are afraid to touch each other. Adolescents do a lot of self-touching and back-rubbing to compensate.

The ageing population may be especially touch deprived after losing their spouses. In another study we conducted we gave elderly people the opportunity to massage infants. The volunteers’ stress hormones decreased and after a month they needed fewer doctors’ appointments.

We can extrapolate the positive effects of cuddling and hugging from massage therapy data, which shows that touch calms the nervous system, lowers blood pressure as well as stress hormones, which in turn means that immune cells can survive. We can be healthier because immune cells kill bacterial, viral and cancer cells. We can also experience less pain and depression as the body’s natural pain killer, serotonin, is also its natural antidepressant and this increases following massage therapy.

Like diet and exercise, everyone needs a daily dose of touch. If you don’t have someone to touch or to touch you, and cannot afford a massage session, be sure to brush yourself in the shower and carry a massage ball around to rub your limbs. You could also take a yoga class or a brisk walk to stimulate the pressure receptors under your skin. This starts the cascade of physiological/biochemical effects that lead to the health and wellbeing benefits of touch.