Question: I have been married to a good man for nearly two years. We are compatible and have many of the same interests. My only complaint is that he is not physically affectionate. I'm a touchy feely kind of a person so I hug him, hold his hand, and touch him in a supportive way when he is upset. I have asked that he do the same for me, and he doesn't feel that this is an important part of a loving relationship. I've explained to him that I would like him to initiate holding my hand. Also, that it would feel supportive to me if he would touch my hand or shoulder while I am discussing some difficult problems.

We've been seeing a counselor who has encouraged him to be more affectionate. He enjoys me touching him, yet just doesn't see the importance of him doing the same for me. He says he's just not a touchy kind of guy and continues to believe it's not an important part of a relationship.

Have there been any studies done that show that touching is an important part of a relationship?

Answer: The first study that comes to mind is the one done quite a few years ago with babies. Babies in homes with families, who were touched, held and soothed, thrived well, and were healthy babies. Whereas, they found babies in orphanages where the caretakers did not have time to hold, touch and nurture failed to thrive. They were listless, lost weight and basically did not behave in ways that the babies in touching families did.

It recent years some researchers have begun to focus on a subtle kind of wordless communication; physical contact. Momentary touches they say - whether an exuberant high five, a warm hand on the shoulder or a creepy touch on the arm - can communicate an even wider range of emotion than gestures or expressions, and sometimes do so more quickly and accurately than words. Most services in churches have the congregation greet one another with a handshake which communicates "I'm glad you're here" more than the word "welcome" would.

David Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California and author of "Born to be Good: the Science of a Meaningful Life," said, "It is the first language we learn and remains our richest means of emotional expression throughout life."

Evidence is accumulating fast that such messages can lead to clear, almost immediate changes in how people think and behave. Studies have found that students who received a supportive touch on the arm from a teacher were nearly twice as likely to volunteer in class as those who had not. Research by Tiffany Field of the Touch Research in Miami has found that a massage from a loved one can not only ease pain but also soothe depression and strengthen a relationship.

Just for fun and this might interest your husband, here is a study done to see whether a rich vocabulary of suggestive touch is in fact related to performance. Scientists at Berkeley recently analyzed interactions in one of the most physically expressive arenas on Earth: professional basketball. In a paper due out this year in the journal "Emotions," Dr. Krause and his co-authors, Cassy Huang and Dr. Keltner, repeat that with a few exceptions good teams tended to be touchers, than bad ones. Christopher Owens of Hartford did a study of 69 couples prompting each pair to discuss difficult periods in their relationship. He said, "It
looks so far like the couples who touch more are reporting more satisfaction in the relationship."

I hope your husband will take these studies to heart and at the very least hold your hand.

Questions may be sent to the Samaritan Counseling Center, 1850 Colfax Ave., Benton Harbor, MI 49022, faxed to 926-6780 or e-mailed to info@samcounseling.org. Luetta "Lue" Burdick (lburdick@samcounseling.org) answered today’s question.