What You Touch May Make You a 'Softie' or Play 'Hard Ball'

In experiments, holding hard, heavy objects tied to tougher attitudes, scientists say

By Jenifer Goodwin
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FRIDAY, June 25 (HealthDay News) -- When it comes to forming first impressions about others, you probably realize that what you see, hear, and maybe even smell influence your assessment.

But new research suggests the way things feel -- the chair you're sitting on, the mug of coffee you're holding -- may subconsciously but powerfully influence your attitudes and behavior.

In a series of experiments, researchers at Yale University showed that the weight, texture and the things people incidentally touched altered how they felt and behaved.

In one experiment, researchers had 54 passersby evaluate a job candidate by reviewing their resume. They did so while holding either a light clipboard or a heavy clipboard.

Participants who held the heavy clipboard judged job applicants to be better overall and more seriously interested in the job than did people who were holding a lighter clipboard.

In addition, those holding the heavy clipboard considered their own task of rating candidates as more important than those holding a light clipboard.

According to the authors, those attitudes are also reflected in people's everyday language -- "heavy weight," "heavy handed," "weighty matters," and "gravity of the situation," for example.

However, those candidates whose resumes were viewed on the heavy clipboards were not rated as being more likely to get along with co-workers, suggesting that the sensation of "heavy" corresponds to seriousness, but not necessarily likeability, the researchers noted.

"Experiences with the physical world, such as hardness, heaviness or smoothness, activate the physical meaning of those concepts, but it also activates the abstract meanings of those concepts -- hard may mean difficult, heavy may mean serious," explained senior study author John Bargh, a professor of psychology and cognitive science at Yale.

In another experiment, researchers found that sitting in hard, cushion-less chairs made people tougher price negotiators and less willing to compromise than people placed in softer, more comfortable chairs.

Researchers had 86 participants haggle over the price of a new car with a sticker price of $16,500.

After their first offers were rejected, participants made second offers. Those sitting on unyielding wooden chairs raised their offered price by less than $900, while those in padded chairs upped their offer by more than $1,200.

The rigidity of the chair, researchers said, appears to have influenced people to take a "hard line" in negotiations.
The study is published in the June 25 issue of Science.

Phrases that use physical sensations to describe abstract concepts -- such as "a rough day" or "a warm person" -- are such an ingrained part of our everyday speech that we hardly notice we're doing it, Bargh said.

That may be because these impressions of the physical world begin to take root in infancy, eventually forming a "scaffold for the development of conceptual knowledge," Bargh said.

At birth, babies use their hands to acquire information about their environment, and research has shown that when young infants touch various objects, they can tell the difference between heavy and light objects, rough vs. smooth, warm vs. cold and hard vs. soft.

"The perception of tactile information is the first sense to develop in utero," said Tiffany Field, director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine. "It makes sense that there are going to be these cross-connections between what we feel with our hands and these concepts of language."

It's well accepted that our other senses are connected with abstract language -- what we see, hear and even smell, of course, stir up all sorts of thoughts and memories -- but the impact of sense of touch has been less appreciated, Bargh said.

A third experiment by the Yale team found that people who'd handled rough jigsaw puzzle pieces were more likely to describe an interaction between two people as adversarial, compared to folks who'd first handled smooth pieces.

And a 2008 study by the same team showed that people were more likely to judge strangers as warm and trustworthy if they (the observers) were also holding a warm drink at the time.

There may be some lessons here for helping to get things to go your way, Bargh said.

"Someone said the best way to negotiate is to give a hot cup of coffee and sit them in a soft chair," he said. "The warmth helps them trust you, the soft chair will make the negotiator more yielding."

**More information**

The [Children's Mercy Hospital](http://www.childrensmercy.org) has more on infants' sense of touch.

*SOURCES: John Bargh, Ph.D., professor, psychology and cognitive science, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director, Touch Research Institute at University of Miami Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine, Miami; June 25, 2010, Science*

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