

On the Joys and Frustrations of the Human Need for Contact

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The apparent repression of love by modern psychologists stands in sharp contrast with the attitude taken by many famous and normal people.
Harry F. Harlow, 'The Nature of Love,' 1958

Why can't people just isolate? It's a question on the minds of many policy makers, public health officials, and frustrated citizens lately. I mean, is it so hard to sit down, turn on our screens and connect with our friends and family on FaceTime? We can even date without changing out of our old sweats! If everyone would just Zoomerize their relationships a bit more, we could all engage in the emotional and social interactions we want and could be done with this dreaded disease! It wouldn't take very long, would it? Is it a fantasy to imagine that 14 days, a month max, and the thing might just sputter out of existence? And, yes, there is also that vexing social distancing problem that people just can't seem to adhere to. Why can't people stay away from one another? Is six feet too much to ask?

Apparently, it is. But why is that?

As a psychoanalyst, when there are large, incomprehensible questions that come my way, I tend to look for the devilish details, so I note the choice of six feet. It wasn't taken from a well-known laboratory finding of how Coronavirus tends to spread. As far as I can tell, it was based on some basic physics of how far a sneeze or a cough can travel and a bit of unconscious association – 'six feet under' (which just happens to be the legal requirement for burying a corpse instituted in 1665 to prevent further infections as the plague was sweeping through London). I don't know about you, but that particular association doesn't make me want to socially distance – it makes me want to vault across the room and hug my mom! A bit of death projected into what is supposed to be a necessary life-sustaining behavior, yeah, it's complicated.

If the association feels too Freudian for you, I note that I am not alone. The 19-year-old pop diva Billie Eilish presciently wondered the same thing in 2016: 'Our love is six feet under, I can't help but wonder if our grave was watered by the rain would roses bloom? Could roses bloom again?' [\[1\]](#) Perhaps we're all wondering the same thing: can we survive six feet apart? And if we do, will we love and care for one another as we once did? Will this do something to us, this distancing of us, who will we be and who will we be to one another when we finally can bridge the life-affirming gap?

These were the questions on my mind recently when watching my three-year old niece walk towards my dad (her grandfather). She proudly told him: 'I tested negative and don't have the 'Rona. It's okay. I am safe. You can hug me'. I will forever remember the pained, desperate look on my brother's face as he gently led her away and my father's haunted look as he watched her receding from him in her princess dress and sneakers. It was then that the thoughts came to mind: who will we be when this is over? In what ways will this six feet have transformed us? Our bodies as sources of death to one another, our touch dangerous, small children whose sense of self is now informed by a sense that they are Thanatos incarnate. And in what ways are our selves as bodies revolting and so very slightly leaning in towards one another in an attempt to tempt fate or the gods, how much are these selves as bodies uncaring enough to punish the warm and the loving and to reward the cold and the stoic?

Our bodies, which are involved in the most abstract sense of self: our sense of being a self, in relation to other selves. Our very feeling of 'me-ness' is brought into being by the sensation of feeling and touching others – the knowledge of where I end and where you begin. There is also the problem of about 5 million sensory nerve receptors. That's the approximate number of the neuroreceptors on our skin that are utilized to detect temperature and vibration, pain and pleasure. One human fingertip has more than 2500 receptors; our very corporeality renders us tactile creatures. So, yes, being a human in relation to other humans is built into the system, or at least the sensory-nervous system. Touch is essential to our mental health.

So it should not be a surprise that we push back at any attempt to stop us from touching one another. Perhaps the only surprise is that this is a surprise at all. This isn't the first time the medical and political system struggled against what is hard-wired within us. The American psychologist Harry Harlow demonstrated this in the 1950s when he showed that infant rhesus monkeys preferred a terrycloth, 'comfy' mother, to a wire mother who provided actual food (milk). He found that although the monkeys went to the wire monkey surrogate for milk when needed, they spend the overwhelming majority of their time clinging to their surrogate terrycloth mama. Yes, even for monkeys, touch is a basic part of becoming a loving being.

Experimental data has shown us that infants who are held and stroked feel less pain from teething, colic and constipation. Children who are touched lovingly by their folks have high self-reports of joy and happiness as adults. Both children and adults who are held and cuddled have lower levels of depression, anxiety and aggression. Oxytocin, a neuropeptide produced in the hypothalamus, is released in large doses during nursing, emotional bonding and romantic attachment. Numerous studies have shown that the release of oxytocin during cuddling makes us feel calm and relaxed. Even when blindfolded, participants in a recent experiment, were able to convey eight different emotions through touch, from gratitude to disgust to love, with about 70% accuracy [2].

Touch can also be helpful in ways that are quite unexpected. A recent study in the journal *Emotion* noted that the more time NBA players spend touching each other (e.g. slapping backs, bumping chests and exchanging high fives) the more successful they are, both as individuals and as a team (Kraus, Huang & Keltner, 2010). Babies who had more skin-to-skin contact as newborns had better psychological outcomes even at ten years of age (Feldman, Eidelman & Rosenthal (2013). Fifteen minutes spent playing and petting a dog has an immediate impact on the psychological health of college students with many positive concomitant physical effects (e.g. lowered blood pressure) (Pendry & Vandagriff, 2019). The cumulative scientific data has demonstrated that oxytocin itself, which can be released through touch 'provides the neurohormonal substrate for parental, romantic, and filial attachment in humans.' (Feldman, 2019). We bond with our most important love-objects by touching them through our 5 million neuroreceptors designed for this purpose.

And yet, despite the innumerable mental health benefits of touch, the desire to stop physical contact has been a passion project for many, often relying on repressing the very love, emotion, or desire that leads to touch. Cross-cultural surveys of many a religion will yield a perhaps over-exuberant attempt to relegate the passionate fantasied life of the newly (and not so newly) married couple not to the carnal pleasures of joining with their beloved, but rather to think of God or the love of God (or at least, for the love of God, not to enjoy it so damn much!). As this religious ideology seems to have had representation in many a time and place, it seems like this is something that is hard-wired in some people, the desire to contain and control desire itself by consecrating sex for the creation of a child alone.

It seems that something about want and desire for the other awakens our own desire, stokes it, to the point where it is sometimes unclear whether we are responding to the desire itself, or to those in authority who would dare deny us this pleasure, the undying appeal of our internal Romeo and Juliet. It would also be dishonest not to mention that desire itself is threatening to some who are threatened by intimacy and the need to control others' pleasure as a response to their own feelings of jealousy or incompetence in achieving intimacy for themselves. In some measure, watching desire-in-action awakens a part of ourselves that may have laid dormant for years; not all sleeping monsters make good cuddle-buddies even in non-epidemic times.

There is also the incredible pressure on health and policy experts whose own sense of worth (not to mention job security) is predicated on having answers to precisely the kinds of questions that cannot be answered right now. How does the virus spread? Well, we know a lot, but frankly not as much as we need to know. Like everything alive and organic there is a lot that we don't know and simply can't predict. Like every good neurotic, public health officials turn to that which is known – masks and social-distancing, but as the death toll rises and the pre-printed government flyers multiply, something in the public consciousness awakens. There is a sense that scientists and medical doctors don't exactly know what they are doing. So many contagious cases unaccounted for and the continual parroting of the same mandates which basically boil down to 'stay away from your loved ones and don't let them see your smile'. On some level, the public knows that there is great truth to the scientific advice and on another level it is also unconsciously understood and communicated that there is something of an obsessive quality about the constant repetition, with little nuance and growing desperation. A sense that with so much out of control, those in power want to control whatever they can control, but that it also has to do with an unowned part of their own unconscious mental well-being that seems awkwardly melded into public policy for the rest of us.

It is not the first time that this has occurred. Similar attempts to control, manage, and manipulate touching for the sake of important public health concerns have preceded 2019 by a century. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the scientific discovery of microscopic pathogens led the medical community to realize that diseases were passed from humans to other humans. Consequently, a phobia of physical touch like the kind we see today overtook many parts of Europe as well as the United States. In its early days, public health officials were not sure how disease transmission occurred, some believed that every person was surrounded by an invisible cloud of germs. Touching and physical proximity to one's children was considered a major public health concern. Doctors such as Luther Emmett Holt took on great public health campaigns imploring the public to avoid physical contact with others, particularly with their own children. A mere goodnight kiss, after all, meant touching your baby with your lips, a possible source of disease (Blum, 2011). Simultaneously, the psychological community sounded the alarm about the dangerous developmental effects of holding infants and coddling children. The American Psychological Association's president, John Watson, spearheaded this war on affection. He spoke extensively about the permanent mental scars that too much physical warmth could inflict on a child, causing them to grow into weak and dependent adults.

As a result, physical affection was hit with the double-whammy of psychological and medical professional opinion-makers, stigmatized as detrimental to a child's physical health as well as to their emotional development. As a result, most parents during this time denied their children physical affection, and in orphanages (which were widespread at the time), children were often raised in virtual physical isolation. Considering Harlow's research on the importance of touch for babies and young children, it is not surprising that the fairly low percentage of children who actually survived these institutions became psychiatrically impaired with a variety of attachment and personality disorders (Blum, 2003).

We find ourselves at a similar crossroads today, encouraged to stay away from our ill and dying so as not to spread infection. This time, however, knowledge is on our side: we know that physical touch is fundamental to our well-being, and that isolation is a great source of mental pain. Does this mean that public policy must change? Probably not, six feet seems to be a pretty good guess as far as we can tell so far. But the messaging of it, the public relations of it simply needs to take in a bit more of what is actually being asked for. Yes, we are being asked to give up some of our humanity. No, there is nothing wrong with those who want to deny, intellectualize, rationalize or dissociate the implications of their refusal to comply with public policies. Defenses are predictable responses when psychological costs are denied by those making the request. It is not strange to note that politics has become rife with projective identification – in the form of victim-blaming, reaction formation – in the form of virtue signaling and regression – in the form of the enormous fractures in political discourse. Yes, the denial of intimacy is a painful thing, But the refusal to deny intimacy is not inhuman, it is the very thing that defines our humanity.

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[1] <https://genius.com/Billie-eilish-six-feet-under-lyrics>

[2] *Emotion* (2006), Vol. 6, No. 3, 528–533.