

Contact Comfort and Challenges of Social Distancing

We are all wired for contact. Not only do we rely on emotional connection, we cannot live without physical touch. It soothes us, relaxes the mind and body, and there's proof. Harry Frederick Harlow (October 31, 1905 – December 6, 1981) was an American psychologist best known for his maternal-separation, dependency needs, and social isolation experiments on rhesus monkeys, which manifested the importance of caregiving and companionship to social and cognitive development. He studied contact comfort: the physical and emotional comfort that an infant receives from being in physical contact with its mother. For instance, we've all seen the reaction that a crying baby can have due to being picked up by its mother; it relaxes and stops crying. He demonstrated that when baby monkeys were socially isolated from their mothers, it can completely dysregulate the animal and lead to distressing emotions. Do humans react similarly? Contact comfort is the basis of an infant's first attachment but it goes far beyond that. It's the calmness and stillness when a friend holds you after having a rough day. It's that feeling of relaxation and calamity when a parent holds you in their arms. When we hug someone, a hormone called Oxytocin is released in our body, which effectively reduces our stress levels. Additionally, our blood pressure sinks and we experience less anxiety during a hug. Science says it. We need human touch for our sustained emotional well being.

So what? Could it be that our feelings of social isolation and lack of contact comfort trump our fears of getting the virus itself? Why, on a fundamental level is this process of social distancing so jarring and unsettling for us all? Governor Andrew Cuomo spoke about this phenomenon in his recent news conference. He notes the fundamental human need for social connection and physical contact and validates our feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and confusion when this is taken away. He shares, "People are struggling with the emotions as much as they are struggling with the economics." He speaks to the personal pain of not being able to see his own daughter who has been in quarantine and what he would do to be able to "hold her and hug her." This is hard for all of us on a fundamental level but remember you are not alone. You have permission to feel confused, unsettled, anxious, or wherever your mind takes you. However, this is also the time to exercise self acceptance and gratitude. As Cuomo shares, "Practice humanity. Show kindness. Show compassion. Show gentility. Show patience. He continues, "Yes we have a problem, and yes we will deal with it. But let's find our better selves in doing it."