

10 January 2009

By: Tudor Vieru, Science Editor



Physical touch stands to benefit both partners in a relationship, study shows
Flickr / Meredith_Farmer

[Touching Reduces Couple Stress](#)

Emotional and social support is always critical

A new research indicates that expressing more affection within the couple, by a form of touch therapy, can increase stress resistance and make the relationship even stronger, compared to a control group. The study, published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, was conducted by experts at the Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City, Utah.

During the test, research leader Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues measured levels of two chemicals, the "love hormone" oxytocin, associated with expressing increased affection towards partners, and the stress indicator alpha amylase, which is usually present in higher concentrations in saliva when trouble in the couple or in society forces individuals to sink in themselves.

The touch therapy involves "non-sexual, caring physical touch, such as hand-holding, hugs, and sitting or lying 'cuddled up'," Holt-Lunstad said.

Thirty-six married couples were separated into two groups, one that was taught how to detect tensions in the couple, as partners learned to recognize their moods and to relieve it through massages and cuddling, while the second was only monitored, and participants were asked not to change their regular behavior.

During the tests, people in the "cuddle" group were asked to pay more attention to their partners' moods, and to relieve stress through neck and shoulder rubs by simply holding and comforting them.

Both hormones were monitored and recorded before, during, and after the experiment, which lasted four weeks and then concluded. According to the published paper, in the first group partners exhibited lower levels of alpha amylase, which indicated that they were less stressed. Oxytocin levels were significantly higher than those of the people in the control group.

"Our data suggests that warm partner contact may be particularly cardioprotective for men. These findings may help us better understand the protective mechanisms of positive marital interactions in the prevention of stress-related diseases," the paper explains.

Blood pressure and levels of the hormone cortisol - associated with the response of the human body to stress factors - were also measured, but, statistically, the team didn't manage to find any differences between the two groups. This seems to indicate that it's not the physical health of the individuals that stands to benefit, but their emotional one.