

Even More Remedial Hugging for the Hugging Impaired

Regular readers of this column (Hi, mom!) may recall that last month's topic was remedial hugging for the hugging-impaired. If you missed it, those 650 words could be condensed to, "When in doubt, hug."

It generated a surprising number of comments from friends and acquaintances, not all of them positive. Despite my assurances that my interests are entirely platonic and wholesome, the word "creepy" was expressed to me more than once.

This is evidently the price that social trailblazers such as I must pay, even when campaigning for the common good.

One man was concerned that I could walk past a woman's outstretched hand for a hug, ignoring her apparent preference for a handshake. "The woman should be dictating the intimacy level," he said. My contention is that the woman's own preferences are not what dictate her proposed level of interaction; it's her perception of what the man's comfort level probably will be. And with a lot of males, that level is quite low.

I frequent a gym almost daily, and I can assure you that hugging is a topic not often discussed among naked men in the locker room. I was in the common shower a couple of days after last month's column printed, and one of the guys (who evidently read the column) eyed me suspiciously while slowly backing away, saying, "Don't make any sudden moves."

Someone else asked me about possible perceived homophobic overtones of my confidence in initiating hugs with women in preference to men, which had not occurred to me. I'm pretty much an equal-opportunity hugger, and I can honestly say I essentially get the same gratification from all hugs regardless of gender or sexual preference.

For those of you who may need a more practical reason to want to improve your hug life, a report was released last month by Carnegie Mellon researchers and published in *Psychological Science*, testing whether hugs act as a form of social

support that protects stressed people from getting sick. Study participants were intentionally exposed to a common cold virus and monitored in quarantine to assess infection and signs of illness.

The results showed that people who were stressed —but received hugs —were less likely to become infected with the virus. The more days a stressed person was hugged the lower their risk of infection. Those who did catch a cold were less likely to feel sick if they'd been hugged in the prior two-week period. But don't go around hugging sick people; it's the hugs they receive when they are healthy that make the difference.

LuAnn and I went to a UI Hawkeye football game in Minneapolis last November, and on our way to TCF Bank Stadium we walked past a smiling, clean-cut college-aged man standing on a busy street corner holding a hand-lettered sign above his head that said FREE HUGS. I circled around him warily, wondering what his agenda could possibly be, but LuAnn walked straight up to him and obliged him.

It turned out to be some kind of behavioral study; she was immediately interviewed by a young woman with a video camera. In response to the question, "Why did you hug him?" LuAnn asked, "Why not?" I submit that this should be the default attitude for the vast majority of us — we shouldn't need reasons to hug, only reasons not to.

One reason not to would be if your intended victim turns out to have a rigid concept of personal space. I may have previously overstated my own affinity for hugging last month, and for weeks people I barely know have been approaching me with open arms demanding their hugs. I've been obliging them, but I'm also beginning to understand how it feels to be hugged partially against one's will.

Despite these minor pitfalls, hugging is a skill well worth developing. Knock yourself out.

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