

## **Just in Time for the Holidays; Remedial Hugging**

I had never been a touchy-feely kind of guy until I met LuAnn some 30-odd years ago.

She was mildly shocked to learn that I called my parents by their first names, hardly ever kissed my mother, or even hugged anyone at all except when it couldn't be avoided...and even then, in a painfully stilted and self-conscious manner.

By contrast, her family members have always collided at the drop of a hat. Also, soon thereafter we became involved with a monthly dinner group that somehow expected everyone hug everyone else upon first and last sight.

It was somewhat painful at first, but I have to admit that I have grown to like promiscuous hugging. A lot. Maybe too much.

I now credit my rehabilitation to "remedial hugging" therapy. It's akin to throwing someone with a deathly fear of water into the deep end of the swimming pool. If you are currently as inhibited and self-conscious as I used to be, you should begin immediately. And just in time for the traditionally huggy holiday season!

LuAnn says she is taking the credit for "making a human being out of me," but I think the hugging gene is buried in all of us just waiting to be unleashed. If you're not currently an active hugger, you're missing out.

Start by following your instincts. There will always be circumstances when you aren't sure if a hug will be appropriate or welcome, and that uncertainty is your sign from God to go for it. Your tolerance for handshakes will rapidly dissipate as you travel this warm and fuzzy bell curve.

It sure worked for me. At the risk of sounding like a dirty old man, I am now a hugging fool. Introduce me to a total stranger and she will get the stuffings hugged out of her.

I say "her" because my obsession with compression seems to apply primarily to females. I'll hug their spouses as well, but mainly on principle and partially to disguise my underlying preferences.

It's probably also because women are natural-born huggers; men, not so much. I can now walk past a woman's outstretched hand for a hug with 99% confidence.

We were at Joe's Place with a group of moderately hammered Hawkeye fans after the Nebraska/UI football game recently and our college-aged waitress was very outgoing and friendly. When I told her I needed a hug before I could decide what to order, she didn't hesitate.

Four hugs later that evening (I was very indecisive) I gave her a \$10 tip on top of my normal generous tip, but as I was leaving, I wondered if at least one of us should have felt a little uncomfortable about the circumstances. \$10 for four hugs (\$2.50 each) might be considered to be the edge of the slippery slope leading to...what...\$20 shoulder rubs? I'm trying not to over-think it.

You may be thinking to yourself that my relatively newfound interest in enthusiastic serial hugging has prurient overtones, but you'd be wrong. Well, *mostly* wrong. There's something elemental and fundamentally comforting, affirming and reassuring about hugging, even with men.

Back to our dinner group, we're aware of our overly spirited hugging tendencies, and a couple of years ago on New Year's Eve a couple of the guys (not me, and only after several Scotches) decided kissing on the lips at midnight would be a natural progression from our usual regimen. It occurred, but the result was mutually deemed to be unsatisfactory. So, we now know our limits (well, the men do, anyway).

As with any close physical interaction with others, there is an element of risk; be alert for subtle clues that your advances may be unwelcome, such as a knee to the groin or a restraining order. Which leads to a word of warning to newbies from this scarred veteran; never initiate a hug from behind with a woman you don't know very well – it can easily be mistaken for groping. Hand placement is tricky and should be practiced first on even-tempered females, preferably under professional supervision.

You now know enough to be dangerous (literally). Happy Holidays, and you're on your own.

*Writer's Group member Dave Parsons trolls for hugs near the business he co-owns on the Coralville Strip.*