

# The Power of Touch

Gentle, wanted touch can calm the body's stress response and support connection. A simple routine hug can help steady breathing and heart rate, lower stress hormones, and lift mood. It also reminds the individual that someone cares for them, that they matter.

A warm, comfortable embrace that lasts about twenty seconds. In research with couples, brief warm contact that ended with a 20-second hug was linked with smaller increases in blood pressure and heart rate during a stressful task. In other words, they were more resilient! In everyday life, a longer, steady hug gives your nervous system time to settle.

## How to try it

1. Ask first: "Would you like a hug?" Consent and comfort come first. No matter how long you have known someone, they must be free to say no. With children, honor consent and also notice when they may not yet have the emotional regulation to understand why a calming hug can help; offer choice, model calm, and never force touch.
2. Get comfortable. Stand or sit so both bodies feel supported. Relax your shoulders.
3. Breathe slow. Inhale through your nose for a count of 4, exhale for a count of 6.
4. Hold for about 20 seconds. You can silently count one-Mississippi or use a timer the first few times.
5. Release gently. Notice how your body feels.
6. Make it part of routines: morning send-off, after school, or bedtime.

## Tips for success

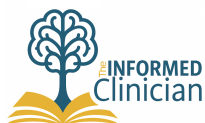
- Frequency helps. Try one to three steady hugs per day with a partner, child, or trusted friend.
- Pair it with words. Add a simple phrase like "I'm here" or "You're safe."
- Match pressure. Aim for a medium, steady hug rather than a tight squeeze.
- Time and place. Choose a quiet moment, not in the middle of conflict.

## Modifications for when a hug is inappropriate

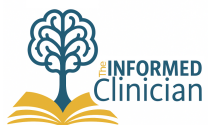
- Side-by-side hugs or a calm "shoulder hug. Conveys, I am here for you without crossing boundaries. Consent is typically still necessary.
- A gentle back pat at a slow, even pace. (Ex: an opposite sex co-worker needs consoling. You are letting them know you care through appropriate touch. The gentle, slow pat is also calming for their nervous system.)
- A hand on the shoulder. Conveys, support, or comfort. "I see you, and I am with you." Pay attention to signs that the touch was not accepted. If a power dynamic is present, consent should be received first by asking, "Would a pat on the shoulder feel supportive, or would you prefer no touch?"

Quick facts: Warm, affectionate contact can buffer stress reactivity. Early, positive touch is linked with calmer stress systems and healthy social bonding across the lifespan. Non-sexual, appropriate touch can lower cortisol and support resilience.

References: Grewen, et al., 2003 DOI:10.1080/08964280309596065; Narvaez, et al., 2019 DOI: 10.1186/s41155-019-0129-0



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