The Common Touch

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American adults touch one another much less than adults in any other culture. Many feel safe only when the distinction between a chaste hug and a sensual snuggle is unmistakable. For HIVers, who must also contend with society's discomfort with the virus, the fear of rejection can deprive them of a powerful balm for body and soul.

The benefits of touch are many and practical. Studies show that a daily 20-minute massage helps children overcome learning challenges and physical ailments. Alzheimer's patients who receive regular therapeutic touch suffer less from troubling symptoms than those who don't. Touch alone can lower blood pressure and decrease levels of cortisol—a stress hormone toxic to the immune system.

So the next time a pair of arms encircles you, hold onto them just a little longer. Squeeze your loved ones a little tighter. Be the first to lend a calming hand, a spontaneous embrace, a shoulder rub. Just say, "Aahhhhhhhh."

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