

HUGGING

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

How long do your hugs last before you pull away? Is it different with your children, with your parents, with your siblings, with your close friends, with your partner? Who pulls away first? If someone pulls away first do you take it personally? For many people, four seconds is a long hug. Usually, after about four seconds there is a slight shift in muscle tension and balance which signals that the hug is over.

We have been hearing about the importance of hugging from many sources. Drs. Gay & Kathlyn Hendricks first talked about the 20 second hug. They said that after 20 seconds of hugging oxytocin was released between people. Oxytocin is the bonding hormone that is released during birth and lactation. However, it can also contribute to feelings of wellbeing and connection between adults. Oxytocin can also reduce your blood pressure and your risk of heart disease; it promotes generosity, compassion and forgiveness. This sounds positive to us!

Dr. Martin Rovers, the psychologist who supervises us told us about a survey he was doing. In the survey he invited clients to rate the degree of happiness in their present relationship and then commit to either 15 minutes of talking together every day for one month or 30 seconds of hugging every day for the same period. After that he asked people to rate the degree of happiness again.

We got curious and began extending our hugs longer. We noticed that sometimes when we were angry or afraid, we might find it difficult to hug or to relax during hugging.

David Schnarch, author of *Passionate Marriage*, talks about “hugging till relaxed”. He invites clients to hug daily using four steps:

1. Stand on your own two feet;
2. Put your arms around your partner;
3. Focus on yourself;
4. Quiet yourself down, way down.

The first step, standing on your own two feet, is both a literal instruction and a metaphor for taking healthy personal responsibility. The 3rd and 4th step involve becoming mindful of your own inner experience, noticing your own body sensations, thoughts and emotions and slowing your breath down to soothe yourself while in close proximity to your partner. These steps include non-reactivity to whatever your partner is doing. Self-soothing is the ability to not lose yourself to others’ pressures and demands as well as the ability to self-centre, or stabilize your own emotions. We often fear being self-centered which is different, it is indifference to others, while being self-centering is about being able to reach out to someone from a place of stability rather than insecurity. It is one of the greatest gifts you can give your partner, being with him or her even if they are being reactive, being available for them without fixing them, teaching them, correcting them, blaming them, judging them or needing them to be different.

Hugging can bring upper limit thoughts, those thoughts that signal that we have reached the limit of our ability to feel positive, to feel close, to feel love. Becoming mindful of those upper limit thoughts is a great way to notice your own habitual patterns that bring us down to a more familiar place. For more about the upper limit pattern please see the article on our website: www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm.

Schnarch says hugging till relaxed is “a perfect example of using touch to grow yourself up by learning to enjoy togetherness and separateness.” When you have learned to do this, your partner can do things you don’t like, you can be angry, or afraid, or sad, but that no longer defines you or informs whether you are OK.

We now hug at least 30 seconds or longer at least once a day, often more. We start love-making by hugging. One of us might notice when the other is irritable and ask for a 30 second hug. Drs. Gay & Kathlyn Hendricks often say to us, “Go for the better idea,” and the hug is almost always the better idea.