



Human Touch in a Pandemic World

Impact and Interventions

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Foreword by Ralph Zimmerer, Vice President Global NIVEA Brand Identity & Brand Capability

When the Chinese authorities closed off the city of Wuhan on January 23, 2020, little did we know how much our lives would be affected by the virus within the weeks and months ahead. At the time, NIVEA was about to launch its global purpose initiative, the “Power of Human Touch,” to inspire more togetherness. As a “we-brand,” we have been promoting a sense of community for over a century, and our aim was to remind people of its importance in our busy, modern world.

Two years prior, we had started to research the positive effects of physical touch on skin health with our R&D teams. At the same time, we were working with international experts, researchers, academics, and practitioners to investigate the “status of human touch” in the world. How do people experience touch? How does it influence their health, well-being, and relationships?

We found out that the health benefits of touch – whilst scientifically proven – were unknown by many, yet highly relevant once understood. At the same time, more and more people were missing touch in their busy, everyday lives. The research made it clear that human touch was a cause worth taking up.

When COVID-19 struck, we decided to conduct a second research study to find out how people cope with a new barrier to physical touch, one which cannot be negotiated without potentially dire consequences for the health of all.

What you hold in your hands is the **Global Report Volume 2: Human Touch in Times of the Pandemic**. It is based on this summer’s survey of more than 11,000 people in nine countries and includes interviews with experts and researchers.

It truly opened my eyes – more than ever before – about the urgent need to drive awareness of how vital physical touch is for humankind, and how it helps create and strengthen bonds in our communities. The absence of these bonds has propelled loneliness to new heights, divided our societies, and affected the health of many.

As a brand, we have decided to act, and we are committing to a multiyear program, supporting projects in the area of physical touch and health across our key NIVEA markets. Our aim is simple: we want to create awareness of the health benefits of human touch and remind people how important touch is for our closest relationships. We also want to demonstrate how we can extend “virtual touch” to friends, colleagues, and anyone who might be lonely, to let them know that they are valued and cared for.

Sending a virtual hug,


RALPH ZIMMERER



Human Touch in a Pandemic World:

How COVID-19 May Change Touch Forever

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically altered our lives in ways both large and small, affecting everything from the way we work, attend school, socialize, and even shop for basic necessities. Of all these changes, perhaps no area of our lives has been affected more than the way that we relate to others. Everyday gestures that we used to take for granted, such as a handshake, sharing an elevator with a colleague, or receiving a hug from an old friend, are now much more difficult, if not outright impossible, as we try to avoid contracting the virus or passing it on to others. In an ironic twist, touch – which is proven to be associated with a number of health benefits, including lower blood pressure and decreased stress hormones – has become temporarily hazardous to our health. To meet our very human needs for social connection, we now interact with others from behind our computer screens instead of in person, go for socially distanced bike rides instead of dining together at a restaurant, and wave at each other from windows instead of sitting around the kitchen table. As inherently social creatures, we continue to seek ways to connect with others within the confines of a new and unprecedented reality.

To meet our very human needs for social connection, we now interact with others from behind our computer screens instead of in person.

In 2018 and 2019, NIVEA surveyed more than 11,000 people in 11 countries to measure their experiences with and

attitudes toward human touch. One key insight from the comprehensive research, a first of its kind, revealed that nearly nine out of ten people around the world believe that human touch is key for living a happy, fulfilled life. In order to determine how the pandemic has affected people's perception of and experiences with touch, this year NIVEA has surveyed another 11,000+ people across nine countries for this report. The new results highlight important changes in our touch behavior, as well as the ways in which the current situation is impacting our collective social habits and emotional well-being. Even as the pandemic has forced us to make difficult choices, such as isolating from each other, it has also revealed what really matters – and the findings show that human touch is more important to us than ever.

Methodology

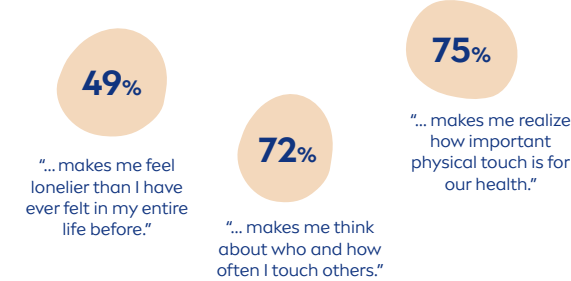
The NIVEA research was conducted by mindline, an independent research institute, as an online survey of 11,706 people in the following nine countries (approximately 1,000 respondents per country): Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, South Africa, South Korea, the UK, and the US. Survey respondents were between 16 and 69 years of age, and were a representative sample based on gender, age, region, and occupational status. The data was collected between April and August 2020; the European field work will continue until October.

Touch during the pandemic: Restricted, but more important than ever

The new study shows that touch remains very important to people around the globe – despite or maybe even **because of** the virus. Last year's study revealed that 87% of people believe that human touch is key to a happy, fulfilled life. This year's study shows that number has risen slightly, to 88%. Furthermore, three out of four respondents said that isolation has made them realize how important physical touch is for health. As the data illustrates, we are increasingly aware of the importance of touch in our lives now that we can no longer engage in touch as freely as we did before, when every interaction didn't require complex mental calculations around the level of risk. In short, our forced isolation has underscored the importance of human touch for our health and well-being.

COVID-19 puts a spotlight on the importance of human touch

The isolation ...



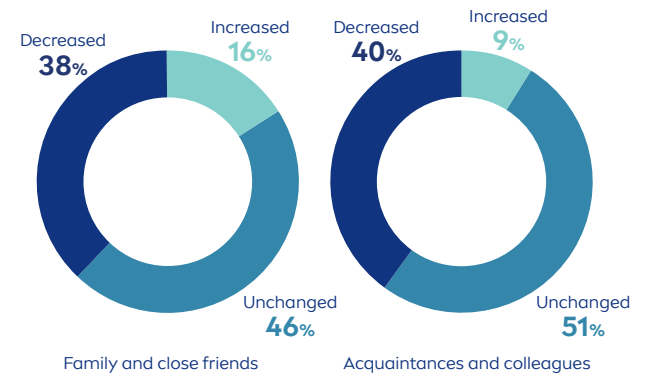
Source: Mindline Research 2020

Before the pandemic, common barriers to human touch included things like lack of time or insecurity about social norms and what type of touch is appropriate and when.

The new results show that these traditional barriers are less of a concern these days. In general, more people are spending more time at home, and their lives are less busy. There is also less confusion around social norms, given that most people understand that touch corresponds with risk of contagion. However, overall, there are more barriers to touch than ever before. More than two-thirds of respondents said that there were more barriers to touch today compared to a year ago.

As a society, the data shows, we have accepted these barriers for now and do not seek more forms of touch. Four out of five respondents globally indicated that they avoid touch rituals like handshakes, kissing, or short hugs. This is especially true in hard-hit countries like Brazil, South Africa, Italy, and France, suggesting that people living in countries that were heavily affected by the pandemic are being especially cautious in their approach to human touch.

COVID-19 has curbed physical touch for many



Rates of response based on amount of touch people experienced personally in the last year.

Source: Mindline Research 2020

In fact, many people surveyed said that their level of human touch during the pandemic has decreased for both their inner circle (family, partners, or close friends) and outer circle (colleagues, acquaintances, neighbors). More than a third said that inner circle touch has decreased, while 40% said that outer circle touch has decreased. The decrease in outer circle touch is to be expected, as more people isolate and limit their physical contact to those in their household. Decreases in touch among the inner circle may at first seem counterintuitive, but makes sense when you consider the number of people who live with elderly, immunocompromised, or other people who would be at high risk should they get sick, and the fact that most people do not live in the same household with their close friends. Additionally, places like Italy, South Africa, and South Korea, where lockdown measures were strictly enforced, have seen significant decreases in the amount of touch within inner but especially outer social circles.

In Italy, more than half of respondents said that their level of outer circle physical touch had decreased since last year. In South Korea, 49% of respondents indicated a decrease, and in South Africa, 46%. South Korea, in particular, is noteworthy because they engaged in less touch than other countries to begin with – making their decreases in touch even more dramatic.

In fact, many people surveyed said that their level of human touch during the pandemic has decreased for both their inner circle (family, partners or close friends) and outer circle (colleagues, acquaintances, neighbors).

Surprisingly, however, around half of the people surveyed said that their level of human touch during the pandemic has not changed significantly. 46% of respondents globally said that the amount of inner circle touch they experience has not changed in the past year, while 51% said that outer circle touch has not changed. To understand why, we have to look closer at the data, which reveals noteworthy geographic differences in touch behavior. In Germany, Australia, the UK, and the US, touch behavior has changed less than in other countries. Despite the severity of the outbreaks, fewer people reported changes in the amount of touch they shared with their outer circle, compared to other countries. In Germany, nearly two-thirds of people said their level of outer circle touch had not changed in the past year. In Australia, the UK, and the US, more than half of respondents said the same. One explanation is that these countries are not “touch friendly” cultures to begin with. We know from our previous global survey that Germany, the UK, Australia, and the US are the least touch-friendly countries, so fewer changes in behavior would be warranted. It’s also possible that, in these countries, skepticism about the severity of the pandemic and the necessity of lockdown regulations has translated to fewer observable changes in touch behavior.

Finally, for some groups, the level of human touch has actually increased during the pandemic. People living in households with at least one child, and young people aged 16–19 were nearly twice as likely to report increases

in inner circle touch compared to other groups – not surprising given that many families are spending more time together at home. However, young people and single parents were also nearly twice as likely to say their outer circle touch has increased, as well. It seems that with these groups, the need for human connection and touch is considerably greater than their fear of catching the virus or passing it on to others, who might be more at risk.

Touch-deprived and lonely: Singles, single parents, and 50+

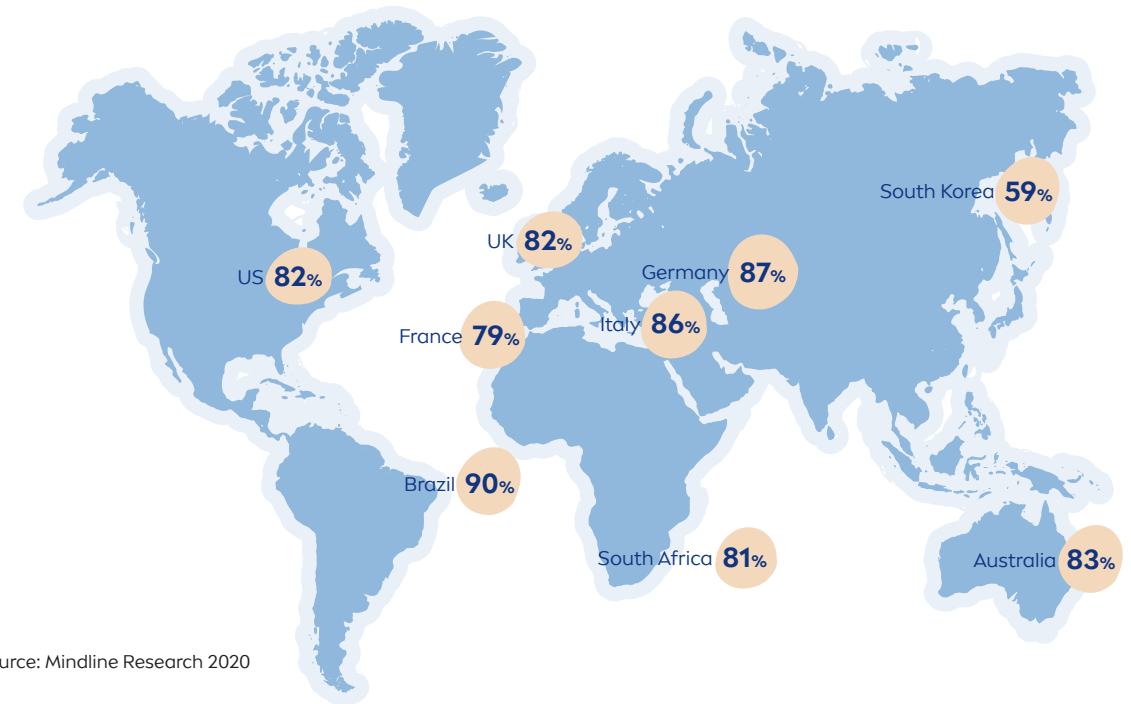
While we can observe differences in touch among countries based on their approach to the pandemic, the NIVEA data shows that individual circumstances also play a significant role in people’s well-being during the crisis, regardless of where they live. A person’s age, whether they live alone or with other people, and whether they are a parent are all factors in their physical and mental health and ability to connect with others through touch. As the data illustrates, some groups are more affected than others.

The first group of people who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and subsequent isolation are those who describe themselves as lonely. According to the survey, that’s a significant portion of the global population. The forced isolation has made almost one of out five people around the world report that they often feel lonely. 49% report that they feel lonelier than ever before in their lives. The data also reveals a strong connection between loneliness and touch: 81% of respondents who indicated that they often feel lonely would like to receive more hugs from others, compared to 45% who said that they do not feel lonely. The association between touch and loneliness seems to increase with age and is also larger for single households. Clearly, lack of human touch can be viewed as a symptom of loneliness, while engaging in touch can help reduce it.

This connection between loneliness and touch is particularly visible in countries where less physical touch tends to be the societal norm. In Germany, almost nine out of ten people who often feel lonely said that they wish they could get more hugs from others, compared to only 43% who do not feel lonely. An alarming difference of 44 percentage points, showing to what extent loneliness puts people at a disadvantage. In Australia, the UK, the US

Lonely people report a hug deficit

Rates of approval among those who feel lonely:
“I often wish I could get more hugs from others.”



Source: Mindline Research 2020

and South Korea, the difference was slightly lower, yet still remarkably high (around 40 percentage points). By contrast, the connection is weaker in countries with generally higher levels of touch in everyday life, such as Brazil (difference of 21 percentage points), Italy (difference of 28 percentage points), and France (difference of 33 percentage points). These numbers are a reminder to us all to include and reach out to people who might feel lonely, especially in countries where touch is not a frequent part of everyday life. The touch people do receive – even if it is only a daily handshake with the mail carrier, or in times of the pandemic a broad smile from a distance – plays an even more important role in fighting loneliness.

Another group that has been hit hard by the effects of lockdowns and isolation is those who live in smaller households – namely singles and single parents. Three out of four people who live alone said that physical touch is not a daily occurrence in their lives. 28% of single

parents said that they often feel lonely. They were also more likely to say that they wished they could receive more hugs from others – 69%, compared to the global average of 61%. Without another adult in the household to share the responsibilities of childcare and remote schooling, or simply to commiserate with during this stressful period, adults living in smaller households are having a hard time.

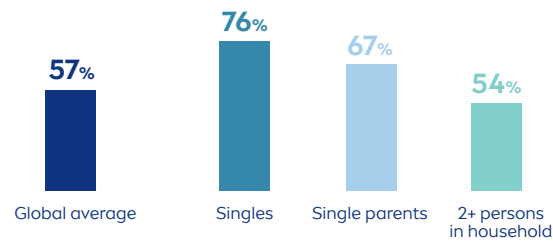
Clearly, lack of human touch can be viewed as a symptom of loneliness, while engaging in touch can help reduce it.

People aged 50–69 have also been particularly affected, as they experience almost no touch from their outer circles these days. According to the survey’s touch diaries, one-third of people aged 50–69 did not experience any physical contact during the full week before the interview.

Nearly three out of four said there were more barriers to touch today than a year ago, higher than the global average. Interestingly, however, only 57% of this group said that they would like to receive more hugs, lower than the global average of 61% – suggesting that many older adults have adjusted their expectations of touch to align with their experience.

Lonely and touch-deprived: Singles and single parents

“Physical touch is not a daily occurrence in my life.”



Source: Mindline Research 2020

In contrast with the groups mentioned above, there is one group that appears to be relatively resilient to the forced touch deprivation: teenagers. For nearly a third of respondents aged 16–19, the level of inner circle touch has increased since the pandemic began, likely as a result of spending more time with family, enjoying the bonding with parents and siblings, and overcoming the crisis with all its challenges together. They are more likely than other groups to say that their relationships with those they do touch have deepened (72% versus global average of 62%). They are also far more likely than other groups to say that they spend more time on social media now than before (82%, compared to the global average of 61%). For this group, it appears that these workarounds – more time with family and inner circle and increased social media usage – somewhat compensate for the disruption to their normal routine and lack of outer circle touch.

Making up for lost time in our post-pandemic future

While the pandemic is not over, around the world people are eagerly anticipating a future that will allow more opportunities for human touch. After many months of lockdowns and forced social isolation, NIVEA’s data shows that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of touch in our lives and could be one possible remedy against

loneliness – though the way that we connect with others through touch will likely change for the foreseeable future.

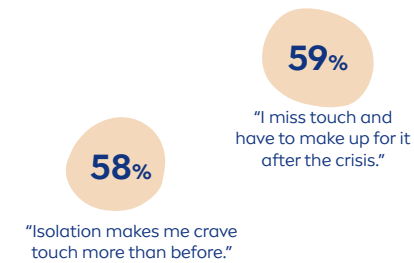
Three out of four people who live alone said that physical touch is not a daily occurrence in their lives. 28% of single parents said, that they often feel lonely.

According to the data, human touch in the post-pandemic world will focus on quality over quantity – in other words, on the inner circle. More than a third of respondents globally expect inner circle touch to increase after the crisis, while outer circle touch is expected to decline in the long run as our current behavior changes become permanent habits. Among them are nearly half of the respondents in Brazil, South Africa, UK, US, and Italy. Perhaps it is a way for them to make up for lost time. However, while outer circle touch is expected to decrease overall in comparison to pre-pandemic times, a quarter of young people aged 16–19 globally actually expect more touch in their outer circle in the long run. No doubt they have a lot to catch up on and are clearly eager to engage in more touch once we can tear down the corona-walls.

Human touch in the post-pandemic world will focus on quality over quantity – in other words, on the inner circle.

Across all groups, the pandemic has left us hungry for skin-to-skin touch, much in the same way we experience hunger for food. In all countries surveyed, every third person said that the current level of human touch in daily life is too low, and three out of five people surveyed want to make up for the current lack of human touch after the crisis. Additionally, the data reveals a strong longing for more human touch after the crisis among highly social countries that were hit hard by the pandemic, namely Brazil and Italy. More than three out of four Brazilians and nearly three out of four Italians said that isolation has made them crave physical contact more than ever before. And who can blame them? None of us are likely to forget the images of empty streets and deserted cafes when Italy went into early lockdown.

Longing for more touch post-pandemic



Source: Mindline Research 2020

One thing is clear: it might take time to return to our pre-pandemic levels of touch, yet the pandemic has already left a lasting impression on our hearts and minds – and also on our skin. We now know how it feels to be unable to touch those we love, and all of the isolation and loneliness that comes with that deprivation. If there is a silver lining to this crisis, it’s that the pandemic has given us a new appreciation of the power of touch for our emotional, physical and mental health. In the future, when we can share a hug, a handshake, or a cuddle without fear, we won’t take those moments of connection for granted. We will spend more time with loved ones, affirm our bonds with each other, and connect through touch once again.



The Healing Power of Human Touch in Times of Disconnection

In 2016, Professor Strauss, a leading neonatologist from Israel, gave an important speech on the “power of touch” at the TEDxTelAvivUniversity conference. The mother of five emphasized the importance of human touch at her neonatology department of the Sheba Medical Center. We talked to her about her passion topic and its relevance during times of disconnection.

Prof. Strauss, can you describe the role of physical touch in the survival of premature babies, and the evidence behind it?

Until 15 years ago, the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) was a place with a lot of noise, fluorescent light from the ceiling, and painful stimulation. It was often a scary environment for babies and very different from life in the comforting womb of their mothers. Parents were scared to touch their 500-gram or one-kilo baby. We, the doctors, didn't emphasize it enough. Over time, however, with more research on the role of human touch and pain prevention, we've come to appreciate that touch is extremely important. When people touch each other, there is a release of oxytocin, the “bonding” or “love” hormone. Once oxytocin is released, blood pressure goes down, and the passive sympathetic nerve system starts to work. During birth, for example, the mother's oxytocin level goes through the roof. Immediately after birth, she bonds with the baby because of the crazy amounts of oxytocin set free in her system. Several other studies have shown that skin-to-skin care helps to develop the immune system of the baby, has a positive effect on weight gain, improves breast milk production, and makes mother and baby more relaxed during a very stressful time in the NICU.

The latest studies are on brain development. Our mature brain looks like a walnut, with many folds and creases. The preterm brain does not look like that. At 26 weeks old, the brain is still completely smooth. This means that during the

time babies spend in the NICU, in the incubator, the brain is still developing. A study involving brain MRIs on preterm babies showed that those babies whose parents did not come to touch them or talk to them while they were in the incubator had less developed temporal lobes. The temporal lobe is the area of the brain responsible for listening and communicating. In those babies who did not receive talk or touch, it stayed flat—no wrinkles, folds, or creases. This sensory deprivation—meaning not enough human touch or verbal stimulation—slowed down brain development. Finally, other studies in Africa have shown that skin-to-skin care reduced mortality of premature babies by 20 percent.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of babies were born—including preemies—under stressful hospital conditions, with fathers not being there to support mother and child. Other families decided to give birth at home. What do you recommend to parents and doctors in this overwhelming, anxiety-filled situation?

I never imagined that this kind of scenario could happen. Ever. At the beginning of the pandemic, all deliveries were performed alone, with no one besides medical staff present to support the mother. Unimaginable. On those occasions when the mother was COVID-positive, we were told to separate the baby from the mother right after birth. Some mothers insisted on keeping the baby with them, and we considered this to be their decision. We didn't have enough information at that point on the risks that mothers might infect their babies. Now, fortunately, there is increasing evi-

dence that the virus isn't passed on to babies in this way, and that breast milk is safe, too.

For obvious reasons, we still have to limit visits to the NICU. We have to protect our staff and keep up our hospital services. With 18 babies in the NICU in the same room, we can't always ensure social distancing, but we have implemented all kinds of rules and processes to keep everybody safe. Despite our best efforts, this situation is very stressful for everybody. We try to use Zoom, so that mothers who can't enter the NICU can witness their baby having a bath for the first time, or being fed. But, we have to acknowledge that it is not like the real thing—and it's frustrating for both the staff and the parents.

Our global survey shows that people in single-person households and of older age have been particularly affected by social isolation. People in hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices have been separated from their loved ones and isolated as much as possible even from caretakers. Given the “healing power of touch,” how would you describe the health consequences from an individual and societal point of view?

The fact that people have to be isolated is devastating. We will see the consequences later on. Already, we can observe more depression, more heart disease, and delayed medical care for things as serious as cancer treatment, because patients are afraid to leave the house. We observed around 20% fewer premature births during the first few months of COVID-19. One explanation could be that mothers avoided regular checkups, with the consequence of more stillbirths. For older people, depression is common and influenced by the level of connection, social engagement, and sense of community they have. It keeps them alive to see their children and grandchildren. Research into longevity often references the “blue zones”—the five areas in the world where people tend to live much longer than average. These studies have shown that apart from a healthy diet, all five regions have one thing in common: high respect for and inclusion of the elderly in the community. Getting back to COVID-19, the evidence is overwhelming that isolation and loneliness affect our life span.

To improve the situation for parents and premature babies at the hospital, you have proposed a triangle of touch: contact, connection, and compassion. How does this translate into the work of a physician?

Our motto is to see any situation through the eyes of the parents. For them, no news is bad news. Parents need to be updated all the time. We need to connect with the parents as often as possible, even if there is no news to share. It is better to over-communicate than under-communicate. Doing so will help them see our compassion, trust our judgment and cooperate on everything that's necessary. Years ago, we treated a baby with a rare skin disease, resembling elephant skin. I stayed close to the parents, encouraged them, and talked about sensory deprivation and the importance of human touch. Years later, the mother wrote a book, where she emphasized the importance of the connection she had with the hospital staff. She had memorized every little detail of our conversations at the time. It opened my eyes to the influence that we have as doctors when it comes to communicating with patients and their families.

Let's look into the crystal ball: When this pandemic is over, will we all change our approach and attitude toward physical touch? To what extent will our society change and how does it affect our health?

We are changing our behavior already—often based on fear, but also based on logic. We have become suspicious toward people. We ask people to put on their masks if they are next to us in an elevator, for example, which is understandable. We have become more reserved. But that also depends on the culture where we live. In Israel, we love to hug. Hugging or kissing is our default behavior when we meet, and social distancing is difficult.

But I am optimistic: we are an adaptable civilization. We have adapted to masks, and we will adapt back, when it's possible. This is a traumatic time and the virus is not a game. We will still find ways to connect and will get back to physical touch once we can, because connecting through touch is in our nature.

Prof. Tzipi Strauss is a specialist in pediatrics and neonatology and holds a master's degree in health-care science from Harvard University. She is the Director of the Neonatology Department and NICU at Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan, Israel, considered one of the ten leading hospitals in the world.



Why We Cannot Live without the Sense of Touch

Professor Martin Grunwald is an experimental psychologist and head of the Haptics Research Laboratory at the Paul Flechsig Institute of Brain Research, University of Leipzig. The author of the best-selling Homo Hapticus – Why We Cannot Live without the Sense of Touch says that feeling and touching are more important for our survival than seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting. We spoke with him about proximity and survival of touch in the pandemic era.

Prof. Grunwald, if the sense of touch is important for survival, how can we survive these times when the most we can do is touch objects and keep a physical distance from others?

There are many factors that determine how people respond to contact restrictions. A baby or toddler is usually unable to make up for the lack of physical contact, and in the worst-case scenario will become psychologically and physically ill. Young people, that is, young postpubescent adults, normally maintain vivid physical exchange within their age group. While this contact is partly motivated by partner-selection activities, it is also brought about by the scale of communication in this age range, which is normally larger. This age group of course finds it difficult to adhere to the contact restrictions. Nevertheless, there are still critical questions for anyone in this age group: How and where will they live, and with whom? When and how will they be an attractive person for others, and whom will they themselves find attractive? Having real, that is, physical contact with other people is essential to answer these questions. That is something that ultimately cannot be decided online or digitally. So, it is not surprising that it is this age group that constantly attracts media attention by violating the restrictions. For people of middle and advanced age, individual disposition determines how the lack of physical interaction is processed. If life takes place within a family or domestic partnership, then these social resources can – ideally – compensate for the general physical distance during this pandemic. However, if someone's life is charac-

terized by general social isolation, then there is a serious risk of physical and mental illness. This is a general effect of loneliness, and it also manifests outside of times of pandemic. For social mammals like us, both extremes can become life-threatening over the long term; both the lack of contact with other people as well as the excessive closeness and lack of options for withdrawing. At the same time, the optimal situation is completely different for each person. Not everyone has the same need for physical contact. The desired intensity of physical contact as well as the length of contact differ from person to person and also between ages. That means each person must develop their own personal strategy for this special time of pandemic so that they can respond to the radically changed environmental situations. In the most unfortunate situations, people retreat to drugs, alcohol, and excessive violence. In the best situations, people exchange well-being massages or seek out similar professional services. (These can also be done wearing a mask.)

You do research on the subject of haptics. What is the difference between touching and being touched? Does self-touch produce the same effects as being touched by others?

The physical deformation of our bodily boundaries, that is, touch, is always an extreme event for us biologically and psychologically. That's because the body has just a few milliseconds to decide whether the skin deformation is harmless or harmful toward it. We are not particularly cautious

about being touched by people we trust; we expect that such touch will be appropriate. Things are different when we are touched by strangers. We cannot intrinsically be sure that the skin deformation will have a good ending. That is why being touched by people we personally trust also leads to pleasant sensations and relaxation responses, dependent on the context and situation. When we are touched by strangers, our neuron system first assesses a great deal of environmental information and the specific stimuli from the touch to see whether it represents potential danger. Only when this assessment has a good result can a touch develop positive feelings. Haptic stimuli that are applied by other people therefore trigger a large number of biological and psychological processes in the people who are touched.

These processes are completely different than if we touch ourselves. The neurons in our brain keep constant track of all the movements we make, so the brain is also informed when we touch ourselves. There are specific channels of information to the brain that are blocked when we touch ourselves, which means that there are fully different neurobiological effects than when we are touched by someone else. For example, these inhibition processes also make us unable to tickle ourselves; our brain "knows" that it is us who is doing the touching. Because the brain works like this, it also means that hugging ourselves does not lead to the same relieving response that we get when other people hug us.

Our studies have found that men have greater difficulty than women in initiating touch, despite the fact that they seek to have this touch themselves. How do you explain these differences?

Each culture and region has specific ways of processing physical touch between people. This applies to bodily communication between the same sex as well as opposing sexes. Physical interaction is not a trivial matter, so men and women cannot help but attract awareness and more attention in this regard. What is decisive for each form of physical interaction is the relationship between each person and the context in which they find themselves. The more we trust another person and the safer we feel in the relevant situation, the more open we are to the signals for bodily interaction that the other person sends.

You do not consider the touch pad to be a replacement for touch and tactility because we are "living beings with

a three-dimensional structure." Nevertheless, can we use technology in the current circumstances to create solidarity until we can physically feel other people again?

Making use of things is always good advice. However, it should not come as a surprise if we are not completely at ease despite the technological support. Seeing and hearing others may represent a passable way to get through a difficult situation for a limited period of time. For most people, though, a critical phase begins after six months where the longing for analog, physical contact with others keeps getting bigger.

Let's take a look at the future. How will our need and demand for touch develop once the pandemic is over? What will be the "new normal" for touch and tactile sensation?

Humans belong to the class of animals known as mammals. As babies and small children, we grow up in extremely intimate physical contact with our social systems. Our species needs this high frequency of contact in the first few years of life in order to survive and grow. This experience shapes us for life and, as a result, it is burned into our social and cognitive DNA. Our species has outlasted plagues and cholera in the past and our species' bodily communication has not changed lastingly because of them. Our need for contact with others socially will likely be greater than our fear of infection. In my opinion, the coronavirus and other misfortunes influence the way our bodily communication behaves over the short term, though not over the long term.

Prof. Martin Grunwald is a psychologist from University of Leipzig, Professor Grunwald founded the Haptics Research Laboratory at the University of Leipzig's Paul Flechsig Institute of Brain Research in 1996 and has led it since then. His specializations are: neurobiological and clinical principles and application-oriented industrial research on active sensory perception (haptics). He teaches and researches at the universities of Jena, Leipzig, Bonn, and Halle as well as at MIT. He is the author of numerous academic publications and three books about the human tactile sense system.





We are Lonely, when Trusted Relationships are Absent

Derrick Feldmann leads Ad Council Edge, the strategic consulting division of the Ad Council, an American NGO, which uses the power of communications to tackle the most important issues of our time. They have been fighting pollution and polio, stood up for women at work, and helped to stop HIV/AIDS. Now, they published a global survey on loneliness, with the support of NIVEA. We spoke to Derrick about loneliness, where it comes from, and how we can help to prevent it.

Derrick, loneliness has been in the spotlight of media and societies around the world for a couple of years. Some call it a “pandemic”; the UK has even established a ministry of loneliness. From what you found in your study, how would you define loneliness and what happened in our world that it seems to be on the rise?

Before getting into the definition of loneliness we must first talk about why this issue is important and especially right now in this moment. Research has shown that people who have satisfying relationships with family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, have better cognitive function, have less depression, and live longer. Similarly, human touch and physical displays of caring have also shown to be important for social connection and bonding, as well as for psychological well-being. However, a lack of deeper relationships with connections may manifest in mental health issues like anxiety, depression, adjustment disorder, chronic stress, insomnia, and even cognitive decline later in life.

The pandemic also has highlighted how the social determinants of health and systemic factors have placed individuals, families, and communities at highest risk.

In our research we tested various definitions of loneliness and discovered that defining loneliness in terms of relationships is key. We define loneliness as lacking trusted and quality relationships. Quality relationships are based upon valued and trusted connections and when such relationships are absent, we are at risk of being lonely. The study found that one in five people in the global sample feel lonely on a regular basis.

You are more likely to be lonely, if you are single, introvert, have a lower income, a disability, a mental health condition, limited mobility and lack a stable job relationship.

Qualitative interviews revealed that many think of “feeling alone” as a lack of emotional support, having no one to talk to, or the perception that no one understands them. In other words, feeling alone is less about being alone physically and more about a lack of an emotional support system or quality and valued relationships.

While loneliness can affect anyone at any time, there’s now another lens through which the issue should be examined: the global COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing and isolation measures. People around the world are taking part in social distancing, isolating at home, wearing masks, and refraining from embracing or touching others. The pan-

demic has also highlighted how the social determinants of health and systemic factors have placed individuals, families, and communities at highest risk.

How can all of us find out whether we are at risk? What makes us lonely, and who is affected most?

When looking at the complex issue of loneliness, those who experience elements that contribute to it, such as isolation, must also be taken into account. Both feeling alone (or lonely) AND feeling isolated (physically or socially) contribute to loneliness. Therefore, people experiencing any of these factors on a regular basis must be looked at in order to truly understand the full picture of loneliness. Over a quarter of the people we surveyed report regularly feeling physically or socially isolated, whether this was their choice or not. So in aggregate, together with those who state they feel lonely, over a third of people regularly experience at least one of these factors of loneliness. Therefore we call them at risk.

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You might be surprised to hear that it is not older people who suffer more regularly from loneliness but younger people. Four out of ten 18–34-year-olds feel lonely. And you might be less surprised to hear—which doesn’t make it less concerning—that you are more likely to be lonely if you are single, introvert, have a lower income, a disability, a mental health condition, limited mobility, and lack a stable job relationship. This doesn’t mean that you cannot feel lonely if you are in just the opposite situation of what I just described. But it means that, from a societal point of view, we leave many people behind if we do not tackle loneliness with these groups.

During this global pandemic, we have all—more or less—been exposed to isolation from our acquaintances, colleagues, friends, and in the more severe cases also from our closest relationships. How does this affect our happiness and our well-being?

Trends from the qualitative research were mixed, indicating that the pandemic has had varied effects on loneliness.

Some feel more physically isolated due to COVID-19, while others have strengthened some connections during this time. In our qualitative interviews, we heard that during the pandemic, many are missing physical interactions with family and friends and are longing to see them, face to face or with one another in close proximity. Though many are using technology to stay in touch, most admit that nothing can quite replace physical interaction. For some interviewees, knowing that everyone is isolated due to the pandemic makes them feel less bothered by isolation; many find that they now feel less pressure to socialize and are embracing the extra free time that they have. Some have even strengthened relationships due to more frequent communication. You also might know friends and family members who are quite happy that they can now focus their time on the people they are really close to, for example supporting and helping older loved ones that live in the same household and receive care.

However, while anecdotal information from qualitative interviews pointed out that COVID-19 is increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation, quantitative survey findings showed that the pandemic only contributed slightly to increased isolation (both physical and social)—though not much to loneliness in its definition of a lack of trusted, quality relationships. Nearly a quarter (23%) report always or often feeling alone during the pandemic, which is not much higher compared to 19% pre-pandemic. This indicates, that though the restrictions clearly make it harder to foster your relationships to others, they cannot dissolve our existing meaningful connections so easily either. COVID-19 did, however, negatively impact happiness according to our study. Pre-pandemic 57% said they were happy. This dropped to four in ten (42%) during the pandemic.

Though general feelings of loneliness did not significantly increase during COVID-19, the number of people who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness did.

In addition, though general feelings of loneliness have not significantly increased during COVID-19, the number of people who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness has. Prior to COVID-19 about a third (36%) of the global sample say they regularly experience at least one

factor of loneliness. During COVID-19, this group jumped to 44 percent, indicating that a larger population is at risk of loneliness as a result of the pandemic.

Let's look at our relationships. What kind of relationships do we need and how many of them to feel happy and immune against loneliness? What holds us off building them and engaging with them?

We know from our interviews that the ideal relationship is built on mutual trust, love, and respect. It requires that both sides invest an equal amount of time and effort and communicate frequently. People were very clear about what they want from these relationships. For instance, they want to be able to talk about anything without fear of judgment, they want to know that they can rely on each other in times of need. And for them shared values are very important. Very practically, this means that they show their care by reaching out and checking in with one another. And in terms of frequent connections, they see the in-person interaction as ideal, because it strengthens the bonds. If people cannot see each other face to face, they see calls or text messages as the next best thing. Overall, these kinds of connections should be at least weekly, in their view, and for some daily.

If it is the right person, human touch can make someone feel loved, safe and appreciated.

You asked what holds us off building these connections. Our qualitative interviews revealed a number of factors that would create barriers to strong relationships. Some of the issues mentioned include distance from one another and limited in-person meetings with strong connections where both can support one another with deeper dialogue. For others it was a lack of initiation on both sides – they could have reached out, but they didn't. And some even commented on past challenges in their relationship where disagreements have not been resolved and continue to get in the way.

Overall, our quantitative findings revealed that people who have others they can count on and confide in are more likely to be happy and less likely to regularly experience factors of loneliness. Those who say they don't have people they

can count on or confide in are more likely to regularly experience factors of loneliness. They are also the ones who say they aren't understood, who can't open up or be their true self, and who wish they had deeper relationships with more people. All of these unmet needs result in feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and sadness.

During the COVID-19 crisis, most of us are very restrictive in terms of who we see, meet, and touch. Did your study reveal, how we would like to interact with other people versus how we interact now? What does this mean for our feelings of loneliness?

Since loneliness is connected to our relationships with close connections, we looked into the approaches taken by those who are lonely versus those who are not alone when they interact with connections. The quantitative survey uncovered that people typically reach out to a connection via phone or text/social media, invite them over to their house or out for a drink or a meal, or drop by their house.

When coping with loneliness, we discovered about two-thirds of people gravitate toward more solo activities, or activities by oneself, such as watching TV, listening to music, or napping. About half reach out to others via technology, followed by connecting in-person. Only a handful of people in the global sample rely on clinical interventions, such as consulting a mental health professional or mentor or taking prescription medication when feeling a factor of loneliness or isolation. These are important findings when it comes to discuss how we – as a society or community – can help people affected by loneliness. We have to understand that loneliness comes with inertia to take the initiative and reach out to others. Former US Surgeon General and author Vivek Murthy calls this the "loneliness paradox." Being together with others can help but taking the initiative is a big barrier.

NIVEA has embarked on this commitment to care for human touch and more togetherness. What did you learn in your study about human touch? How important is it for our close connections and our wider circle of the people we interact with?

When feeling alone, it can help you to be in close proximity to or physically touching your spouse, kids, or parents. Human touch – as much as in-person-meetings – is important

to support and maintain existing, close connections to prevent people from falling into the 'at risk' category.

In general, when people are feeling alone or lonely, they prefer human touch from someone with a strong relationship. From those, who are less close to them, they prefer being in close proximity instead of actually touching.

Touch versus proximity depending on level of connection was also heard in the interviews: hugging or embracing can greatly impact how a person feels – though it must be from someone they are comfortable with. If it is the right person, human touch can make someone feel loved, safe, and appreciated. People mention how it helps them relieve stress, feel cared for, and build strong bonds. In summary, human touch is a great tool to reinforce, strengthen, and maintain existing strong relationships with connections.

Let's look at those who are at risk and vulnerable. What did you learn about effective interventions to help them get out of their loneliness crisis? What can we do as a society? What can a brand do to support? And what can all of us do to protect ourselves?

People do a variety of things when they feel alone or isolated, though as I said before about two-thirds gravitate toward more solo activities. Half actually reach out to others via technology, and about one in four connects in-person with someone. And then there is some that go to see a mental health professional or coach. What is important to know for those who want to help: about a third of people who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness are likely to get in touch with others to some extent. They schedule calls or video chats with close family and friends, join a group activity they enjoy, receive phone calls, or talk to their mental health or clinical therapist.

Remember the "loneliness paradox" – those who are lonely tend to stay by themselves.

Interventions should educate the public on the real risk factors of loneliness. Leaders and key stakeholders, including brands, should focus on educating and informing those most at risk through cause and social issue marketing efforts about the contributing factors to loneliness. In addition,

brands can help promote relationship and connection self-assessments and support or develop campaigns that nudge individuals to communicate with their loved ones. Remember the "loneliness paradox" – those who are lonely tend to stay by themselves. Even if they are active and go out, they gravitate toward solo activities. For example, they might go to a concert, but not engage in conversation with others. Or, they may be connected on social media or through a social group but don't have conversations or a meaningful talk. Brands can help to overcome this. And nudge those who feel lonely as well as all the others to reach out.

As I mentioned earlier, strong relationships are crucial to mitigating feelings of loneliness and isolation. When individuals can accurately assess their own connections and understand how to build stronger, more meaningful relationships – especially after big life events or lifestyle changes – they then have the tools to strengthen their relationships as a way to prevent their own loneliness or isolation.

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About This Global Report

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Impact and Interventions**

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