



Chapter 1

The Touch of Love

The young mother approaches her baby with outstretched arms. He hears her coming and immediately turns his head toward her. His eyes lock onto hers and they both smile faintly. He throws his arms up toward her as she reaches down and swoops him up. She holds him up and stares into his eyes with the look of joy, excitement, and adoration. They both begin cooing and babbling. She serenades him with the rhythmic, high pitched but low and tender voice of the universal baby talk. Then she cuddles him to her soft, warm body and begins rocking him back and forth, intermittently cooing, gurgling, babbling, singing, laughing, and sometimes “tearing up” with joy.

What is going on here? You know immediately what it all means, the mother knows, and even the one-year-old baby knows, all without ever uttering one meaningful word. The mother and baby are loving each other. Putting it as precisely as we can . . . the mother and her son are adoring each other completely in the primal scene of loving.

—Jack D. Douglas and Freda Cruse Atwell, *Love, Intimacy, and Sex*

- ◆ **Do you associate touching and love?**
- ◆ **Do you associate touching and safety?**
- ◆ **Does it make you feel secure to make eye contact with someone you like or love?**
- ◆ **Do you enjoy the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of making love?**

A secure, loving attachment to your primary caretaker—usually your mother—is your first testing ground to learn love. It is within that relationship that most of us discover the many small behaviors and feelings which we ultimately need in order to be able to enjoy the dissolution of boundaries which occurs in ecstatic sexual union.

When you are examining your feelings about being a sexual person, you should first notice how you feel about giving and receiving touch. Touching isn't sexual *per se*, but touch is the foundation upon which your ability to enjoy sexuality is built; it is vital to loving and to sexual expression. To have skin contact with a partner and to feel the warmth of his (or her) body remains an essential component of many kinds of love relationships.

What does touching mean in your family of origin? Does touching mean love, help, comfort, fun, pleasure? Is it easy for you to express your loving feelings through touching another person? Or does gentle physical contact feel unfamiliar and strange? Does sensual touch feel bad, bringing up memories of guilt? Does any kind of touch bring a startled response, or memories of pain and fear?

If you were lucky, you grew up in a family in which love was expressed through touch. You associate touch with caring, safety, comfort, and relaxation. You feel confident using touch to express wishes for more intimacy or a desire for more or less physical contact. You naturally use touch to diffuse anger, and to smooth over disagreements.

When you are on the receiving end, your associations to your partner's touches are good ones. Gentle touch makes you feel cared for, safe, important, and valued. When you want to, you can let touch lead you down the pathway to sexual ecstasy.

Ironically, touch is so basic to sexuality and yet there are millions and millions of people whose enjoyment of sexuality is hampered by problems with physical contact. They don't feel comfortable, natural, relaxed, or safe giving or receiving touch.

Some people come from loving families who didn't touch, so touching was never linked to love. Other people come from loving-but-anxious families, so touch is linked with anxiety. In some families, the meaning of touch has been distorted by neglect, violence, or sexual abuse (see chapters 10 and 11).

I feel that if I had one thing I could change about my childhood, not being touched would be it. I don't think there is anything more isolating. Plus it makes you feel like you are a leper or something, because all around you

people are touching each other. In books, people are touching each other, too. But no one is touching you . . .

—Sandy, 23

I think I was affected negatively by the fact that my mother was emotionally responsive to us as children, but not physically. She wasn't comfortable with physical attention. She would tell me to "stop being mushy" if I hugged her too long.

—Trina, 35

And I had this dream that I was in your office and you were stroking my hair, which is something that an uncle of mine did to me one time when I was eleven or twelve and needed it. And the feeling of being comforted was so strong (and so unique to me) that it stuck with me.

—Greta, 49

The Benefits of Touch

Suki, a four-and-a-half-year-old girl, jumped onto her mother's lap, wrapped her arms around her, sucked her mom's nose and licked her ears. Her mother, who loves touch, hugged the child back, kissed her, and laughed.

We humans learn to love not by instruction, but by being loved. In psychologist Harry Harlow's famous experiments with baby monkeys (1965, 1969), Harlow found that the need for physical attachment and comfort superseded the need for food.

Anthropologist Ashley Montagu, Ph.D. (1971), looked at the role of touch in the development of animals and humans. He proved that humans have to undergo certain kinds of tactile experiences in order to develop normally. In all sorts of mammals, study after study which Montagu reviewed proved that touching by the mother animal was crucial to behavioral development. Animals which were gentled by their mother were soft-hearted, unexcitable animals. Lack of gentling produced fearful, excitable young ones.

Babies are soothed by touching and warmth (Ainsworth 1978, 1982). Studies of infants in orphanages (Bowlby 1971–79) have shown that unless

human infants are touched lovingly by their caretakers, they become depressed and may die.

The Pleasures of Having a Body

“Sexuality” isn’t just intercourse or genital contact. It begins with a basic, instinctive response of pleasure to touch. At best, parents impart a basic optimism about the body—the child’s body as an entity, and bodies interacting together. Look around you and watch the parents you see in crowds, or at parks. There are huge differences in the ways parents touch their infants and children and in the messages children are given about their bodies.

Some children are just lucky enough to grow up in families where affectionate touch is as available as air for breathing, and bodies are seen as vehicles for fun. People who grow up with a lot of love and affection tend to feel very comfortable and contented with sexuality as adults.

Some people have wonderful memories of being touched throughout their childhood, when physical contact is used to soothe, to connect, for affection, or for play. They remember jumping into their father’s (or mother’s) arms at parks, or “dancing” while standing on top of a parent’s legs while that parent moved around, carrying them, or actually dancing grown-up style with their parent at a special event.

When a parent takes a child in her arms and comforts her when she is upset, or physically hurt, that parent is teaching the child the fundamental positive ingredient of sexuality. When a father wakes up a child in the morning by quietly talking to him and rubbing his back, he is teaching him about sexuality. When parents, with watchful eyes, encourage a child to jump on a trampoline, or to climb and swing on a jungle gym, you could even make the case that these parents are teaching the child about sexuality. From a young age, all these children associate touch with love and soothing, and they associate their own bodies with play, delight, relaxation, excitement, love, fun, competence, pleasure.

Children who associate touch with love, in turn, touch their parents lovingly and empathically. When they are still tiny, these children then begin using touch to show love and caring for others.

A little girl of fifteen months comes up to her mother, who is in the early stage of labor with the girl’s sibling. When the mother grimaces in pain, the little girl comes up to her, kisses her, and says,

“Poor mommy.” This tiny child has already become comfortable expressing love and caring with touch.

Culture and Touch

How touch was handled in your family depends, in part, on your ethnic background. Different ethnic groups have dissimilar sets of values and behavior. For instance, Greek families lovingly touch their young children quite frequently (Welts 1982); Portugese children tend to be touched affectionately from infancy only until school age (Moitoza 1982); and Irish families do not express their love through touching (McGoldrick 1982).

North American culture, as a whole, isn't very touch-feely. Compared to people of some other nationalities, we in the United States are a bunch of cold fish. In one study of friends in a coffee shop, American pals were found to touch each other an average of twice an hour, while French friends touched 110 times and Puerto Rican friends 180 times (Alfvin 1995).

Loving Eye Contact: Another Kind of Touch

My mother was a very cold woman, very cold. I can't ever even remember seeing her look at me and smile. I'm still afraid of women. There are times when I want to reach out and connect, and I can't do it. I just withdraw. I can't make the first step toward contact.

—Jim, 46

Take some time, now, to think about the kind of eye contact shared by members of your family, because eye contact is a kind of nonphysical touch. It is in the parent-child bond where you probably first learned the “look of love.” However, in some families, loving eye contact between parent and child was missing.

In the primal scene of love described at the beginning of this chapter, the baby and the mother gaze at each other. In fact, according to Douglas and Atwell (1988), it is common for a mother who loves her baby securely to pick the baby up, hold its face directly in front of hers, so that she can focus her eyes fully on the baby's eyes, and look into those eyes with complete in-

timacy for as long as twenty seconds or more—this is the longest period of unblinking eye-fixation found in human experience. Douglas and Atwell comment, “She and the baby are looking into each other’s souls. They are *communing* with each other, expressing and receiving adoration, love, and the sense of self” (p. 58).

In adult relationships, Dr. Helen E. Fisher (1993) describes the gaze as the most striking human courting ploy. According to Dr. Fisher, in Western societies, where eye contact between the sexes is permitted, flirting men and women often stare intently at potential mates for about two or three seconds, during which their pupils often dilate—a sign of extreme interest. Afterward, the starrer looks away.

With enough experience in loving communion with your mother (or other adoring parent), in infancy and beyond, you automatically learn to look at other people to whom you are attracted with a smile. (Often this happens so subconsciously that you let the other person know your interest even before you, yourself, are consciously aware of it.) Without the early experience of receiving adoring gazes, reaching out to others to make intellectual, emotional, or romantic connections probably feels too risky.

Steve, a single man, came into therapy to work on his difficulty attracting women and starting relationships. When talking about his futile attraction to a woman in his church group, and how he couldn’t just look at her and smile, so that she would know he was interested, he said, “Smiling at another person doesn’t feel natural . . . I think if I really look at her a lot, she’ll punch me, or turn me in to the cops.”

Steve’s discomfort with eye contact was a major ingredient in his inability to connect with a partner. As it turns out, his mother had spent his early years more in love with a bottle of alcohol than she was with him. She neglected him in his infancy and didn’t spend time engaged with him face-to-face, gazing at him, playing with him, or singing or talking to him.

Because Steve’s mother hadn’t adored him, eye contact with a woman to whom he was attracted felt dangerous and unfamiliar. In therapy, Steve soon figured out that because he wanted attention but was fearful of rejection, he wasn’t able to make good eye contact with women. Women didn’t trust him. This led to potential partners actually rejecting him, further frightening him. Steve had to learn to risk making eye contact with others, practicing in the safest situations for small amounts of time, then building towards

making eye contact for longer periods of time and in less safe situations.

Pleasure or Anxiety?: Styles of Attachment

Bill came into sex therapy with his wife, Vanessa. Bill had always felt comfortable with sexuality, but Vanessa had never been interested. When looking into what each of them had learned in their family about being sexual, they found that Bill's mother was very affectionate, while Vanessa's family had been very cold.

With pleasure, Bill recalled an intense memory he had about his mother's belief in touching. At age ten, an uncle was visiting their house. Bill was resting on the couch, next to his mother, and he was leaning back into his mother's arm and resting his head on her full breasts. The uncle criticized him for being too old for this. Bill's mother jumped right in and told the uncle, in no uncertain terms, that this was perfectly all right and that she was glad they had such a close relationship. Bill identifies his mother's openness with touching as an important building block in his love of sex.

Recent research supports what many sex therapists see in their practices: that when people grow up in families which fail to link touch to pleasure, relaxation, and love, sexual problems result. Psychologists Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw (1984) found that babies, in their first years of life, adopt three different ways of relating: secure, anxious, or avoidant—depending on how caregivers treated them. Secure babies see their mothers as available and interested. They feel free to explore the world. Anxious infants see their mothers as sporadic caregivers and are always in a worried quest to win their mother's love. Avoidant babies see their mothers as physically and emotionally rejecting, and learn to turn off their needs and feelings as a result.

Styles of attachment as infants seem to be related to adults' ways of relating to other people and to their subjective feelings about their sex lives. Secure adults found it relatively easy to get close to others. They enjoyed nearly all physical and sexual contact, from cuddling to oral sex. They were willing to experiment sexually, but to do so in the context of a continuing relationship. They were unlikely to engage in one-night stands or to have sex outside of their primary relationship.

Avoidant adults tended to become less invested in relationships and tended to be lonelier. They demonstrated less enjoyment of all physical, as

opposed to sexual, contact. That result fits well with infancy researchers finding that the parents of avoidant children disliked close physical contact.

Anxious adults liked the physical, nurturing aspects of the relationship, but were not as thrilled with sexual expression. In their interactions with other adults, they scored low on sensitivity and high on compulsive caregiving.

There Is No Substitute for Touch

There are plenty of excellent, otherwise adoring, consistent, and concerned parents out in the world who feel unable to use touch to express their love for their children. If your parents were like Sylvia's mother, you might find it difficult to connect touching, love, and sexuality.

Sylvia grew up alone with only her mother. Her father had abandoned them when Sylvia was only two years old. Her mother, Joan, loved her very much, and was a very responsible caretaker in almost every way. Unfortunately, she didn't like to touch.

When Sylvia wanted to hug and kiss her mother, Joan asked her "not to be mushy." When Sylvia wanted to climb into her mother's lap, Joan told her that that would mess up her work clothes, and then she wouldn't be able to go into the city and make the money they needed to survive.

But Sylvia knew her mother loved her, and she grew up feeling good about herself in many ways. Joan taught Sylvia how to take care of the house and be responsible for getting dinner on, leaving Sylvia elaborate instructions for every step of the preparation. Sylvia always did as she was told, and Joan frequently bought her little trinkets to show her approval for Sylvia's responsible behavior. Sylvia still cherishes the set of Russian nesting dolls her mother once brought her home, as a reward for her helpful behavior during a particularly difficult week.

As an adult, Sylvia has trouble in relationships with men. She is not comfortable expressing herself through touch or sexuality. She expresses her love in exactly the way she was taught to: she takes care of her boyfriends by ironing their clothes, packing their lunches and their luggage for trips, and organizing life for them both. She keeps the house spotless. But because Joan didn't link touch and love in Sylvia's childhood, Sylvia can't relax and get comfortable with being sexual, so she avoids sex as much as she

can. Sylvia cannot understand why all of her boyfriends eventually leave her, despite the many ways in which she shows her love for them.

If you feel uncomfortable with being sexual, like Sylvia, and your parents were basically good, self-sacrificing, loving parents who weren't comfortable with touch, it may be painful, or guilt-producing, to let yourself admit that your parents weren't saints. But don't, as Sylvia did, avoid facing the issue that affection and sexuality make you feel uncomfortable. Instead, work on increasing your comfort with touch, and use the exercises at the end of this chapter as a guide.

Turning Up One's Nose

Ben was dragged into marital therapy by his wife Elise, after fifteen years of marriage. She complained about his "meat and potatoes" style of lovemaking. "Ben hates all of the sights, smells, or touches of lovemaking," complained Elise. "He doesn't like to lie around and cuddle, is always complaining that I need to take a shower, even when I am perfectly clean, and he can't stand to touch my vagina. He never makes a sound when we make love."

As we explored his history, Ben became aware that his mother, Nina, was extremely fastidious, almost phobic, physically. He recalled that he and his sister used to laugh about his mother's bathroom habits. Growing up, when his mother left the bathroom, there never was any evidence that she had ever had any bodily functions at all: no smell of gas, no trace of urine, no used sanitary tampons in the bathroom. He and his sister used to wonder how she did it!

Elise recalled watching her mother-in-law coming to help after their first child was born, and changing the baby for them. Nina went at the task in a perfunctory, almost rote way. She wrinkled up her nose at the smell of the dirty diaper, and threw it away by using only two fingers, in order to touch it as little as possible. She cleaned the baby thoroughly, and then rediapered her as quickly as she could, not taking any time to play with the baby, or kiss her naked skin. The task accomplished, she proudly handed a clean-again baby back to Elise.

As Ben and Elise told these stories, they began to understand the source of Ben's discomforts with bodily sights, sounds, tastes,

and smells. Ben decided to take some time to reprocess and change the negative lessons he had learned about touching, sights, smells, and sounds.

It isn't easy to make the kinds of changes Ben needed to make. Whatever way you make love grew out of what has been comfortable. The first step often is a new sense of self-observation, a new awareness of your own embarrassment with the earthiness of sexual contact. You might notice that you are wondering for the first time *why* certain activities you disdain are repulsive to you, rather than simply avoiding them. Initially, realizing your profound shyness will make you feel less adequate sexually, not better. But the more you read, think, look at, and experiment with new ways of being physical, the more your sexual repertoire will grow.

Loving but Anxious

Because subconscious associations to touch are so powerful in determining adult sexual response, growing up with loving parents who were anxious in their physical caretaking can create sexual problems. When parents are overconcerned emotionally, and also very clingy physically, touch comes to mean suffocation and anxiety rather than fun, comfort, or relaxation.

Zack and Greta entered marriage therapy and presented some issues about sexuality as well. Greta was very much in love with Zack, and he felt the same way about her. Verbally, he was wonderfully sensitive and supportive. He was tender with their children, and able to enjoy being physical with them in a playful, loving way. But Greta complained that Zack seemed to pull away from her whenever she wanted to be affectionate.

Zack was puzzled by his own reactions. He was attracted to Greta physically, and loved her. Yet his subconscious reaction, if she reached out to grab him, or wanted to spoon in bed with him, was to run or push her away.

After months of exploration, Zack finally made the connection, which went back to his parents. Both were loving, but anxious. His father was more distant, but his mother's caretaking and touching had an anxious and intrusive quality. Zack saw that his association to Greta's holding him was the same feeling of suffocation he got in his family, when his mother's overconcern and

compulsive physical caretaking and touching made him want to escape.

Zack also realized that he didn't have the same reaction when his children wanted to cuddle because they were so small, relative to him, that he never had concerns about being suffocated or controlled.

Neglectful, Violent, or Abusive

Families where parents physically and emotionally neglect or abuse children, and families where the parents are physically violent toward each other produce children whose associations to touch and love are deeply damaged.

John is terrified of connecting to another person. Still a virgin, in his fifties, he has never been in a serious relationship, although he is well liked at work and by the parishioners at his church.

John is the third child of four boys. John's mother tried to make do in her life with her alcoholic husband. She grew so depressed that her capacity to nurture her children was severely limited. By the time John was born, she didn't have much energy left. John was a "good baby" who didn't cry much. His mother left him in the crib much of the time, because she was busy with his older sibs. Her "caretaking" was very haphazard. As John got older, his mother left his older brothers in charge of him. He remembers a time that he was smashed in the face by a hardball at a game, and when he went to his brother with his bloodied face and broken glasses, he just laughed at him.

John never linked touch with love, and he learned that no one could be trusted. Naturally, making a sexual connection to another person feels terrifying to John. The few times that a woman has tried to be affectionate, he became frightened and confused and pulled away. He longs for a relationship, but is too petrified to initiate anything. He doesn't believe that he is lovable and is terribly afraid of the pain of being disappointed if he becomes dependent on anyone.

Growing up in a home with any kind of violence changes one's sexual associations in still another way: Human touch comes to be associated with

physical danger. It is not uncommon for men and women from violent homes to have a total inability to close their eyes and relax. Trust in the physical safety of the world has been broken.

If you have realized that you or your partner's attitudes toward touching and sexuality has been severely distorted by a violent, abusive, or neglectful family, read chapter 11 before you go on to chapter 3.

There Is Hope

If you grew up in a home where your parents never touched you tenderly and appropriately, becoming comfortable with touch as an adult may seem like a difficult, if not impossible, undertaking. But the good news is that learning to like touching and being touched is something that you *can* do at any point in life.

If you are in a loving and safe relationship with another person who cares about your welfare and growth and who is mature enough to give you a vacation from pressure for genital contact, you have a perfect situation in which to learn some of the joys of nonsexual touch.

Betty and Sam had been married for six years. Although they had had a wonderful marriage, with mutual respect and love, Betty had never enjoyed lovemaking. She couldn't relax, and she never felt sexual pleasure. She just had sex with Sam as part of her "wifely" duty. She commented that she saw her body "as a means to carry my head around." They decided, at Sam's urging, to enter sexual therapy.

In discussing their sexual histories, it became clear that Betty's family was rather critical and cold. In addition, the parents very rarely touched the children lovingly. They were serious workers, who believed that if they didn't drink alcohol and always kept their children clean and fed, they were being excellent parents.

In sexual therapy, it took many, many weeks before Betty and Sam could take time off from their chores and relax enough to even *try* sensual, nongenital touching. At first when they did it, Betty felt strange about it. But after she got used to it, Betty began talking about how special it makes her feel to be touched, when Sam spends a lot of time on her. She realized that this was the first time

she really felt that special to anyone and had enjoyed the touching and how relaxing it had been.

They came in after a week of vacation. During the past two weeks, they had been doing the sensual touching and had begun to touch genitals. There was something different about the way they were talking about it. Betty was talking about how relaxing it felt, but not talking about how it was sexually exciting.

Sam was expressing some anxiety that he was “doing something wrong.” Betty kept saying that Sam wasn’t doing anything wrong, that it all felt good, relaxing, and that she was finally getting to the point of accepting that she deserved to be touched like this. It was obvious that Sam was upset that Betty wasn’t turned on sexually in any way. At the same time, Betty was taking much more pleasure in touching Sam and giving him pleasure. Sam said something about them being on a plateau.

Something else was going on that had to be integrated: Betty was beginning to feel the pleasure in her body of being loved in a physical way (not a sexual way, yet) that she had missed in her childhood.

Betty spoke excitedly: “Yes, that’s exactly right. This is what is going on. I’m finally feeling, ‘Gee, this really is happening to me. Someone really is touching me like this. I really am getting these touches and hugs.’ It is almost as if I am picking up a piece of the puzzle and fitting it in, when I didn’t even know that a piece was missing.”

Betty said that sometimes, she was actually having an out-of-body experience, where she was looking down at herself and saying, “Wow! This really is happening to you. Someone is touching you like this.”

All of what she was feeling from the tenderness and the touching was tied in her mind to her self-worth. It didn’t have any sexual connotations yet, really. In fact, Betty was tapping into a very powerful knowledge, but a sad one, too, that this experience was one she needed in her childhood but had entirely missed. And while she didn’t actually feel sad right as he was touching her, she felt sad at the loss afterward.

So Betty was going back, developmentally, and learning how to link touch with love. And just like loving touch shouldn’t/wouldn’t be linked with adult genital sexuality for a child, it wasn’t with Betty yet. She needed to take some time to let herself have

this new physical experience of being loved—of having physical pleasure given to her—without it being sexual, yet.

And at the same time, since love and touch were being linked in a new way for her, she was touching Sam in a new way. Sam now reported that she was coming over to him, routinely, and touching him on the back, or giving him hugs, during the day. She had never done that before. And even though she couldn't be genital yet herself, Betty was enjoying touching Sam's penis and giving him genital pleasure in a new way now.

Sam tolerated feeling left out emotionally for several more months as Betty thought about her family's attitude toward touch and felt a new sadness. Sam also had to take care of many of his own needs, sexually, for that time period. They spent a lot of time together taking massages and baths together.

Sam began to wonder whether Betty would ever feel turned on, or whether she would just stay at this stage where she felt physical pleasure and relaxation. But he was a wonderfully patient man, and it paid off.

After a few months of learning about touch, Betty's therapist started her on exercises to discover her own abilities to give herself sexual pleasure. Betty did this new homework, and quickly, she began to integrate her new ability to relax and make the emotional connection between touch and love. After about sixteen months of sexual therapy, Sam and Betty reported having sexual passion in their marriage for the first time.

The dramatic change which occurred in Betty's feelings about herself and her sexuality was amazing. The most important ingredient in their success was their deeply loving and respectful emotional connection to each other. Sam managed to put most of his hurt and upset feelings into words. He didn't withhold, sulk, get angry, or punish Betty when she needed to withhold intercourse in order to explore her own feelings. He put his sense of being left out of her emotional life into words, too, and thus avoided increasing the emotional distance which had temporarily been created in their relationship.

Not all connections are as safe and as strong as Betty and Sam's. If you and your lover have a relationship where communication is a problem, or at least one of you is full of tension, resentment, or has problems regarding power and control, then you will need to strengthen your nonsexual relationship first, before you go on to changing your feelings about sexuality.

The Importance of Nongenital Touch

Some younger men with strong sex drives do not realize their general discomfort with receiving touch, since they define being sexual as penile penetration, and their erectile response is strong. If their partners do not complain about getting enough nongenital touching before intercourse, the sexual routine may not include much intimate, nonpenetrating touch. But learning more of the pleasures of whole-body touch may become crucial to men in the midlife years, when sexual drive diminishes somewhat, and automatic erections stop occurring. Many men haven't read much about the normal changes which occur with age and they panic. They believe that they should be able to be aroused instantaneously, and it isn't as easy anymore. In midlife, much to their surprise, being touched by their partner becomes an important route to sexual arousal. Thus, sometimes it isn't until middle age that problems or discomforts with touch become evident for men.

Women's bodies function differently from men's, and throughout women's lifespan, the full sexual arousal important for orgasm usually depends on a period of nongenital touch. So, women who are not comfortable with nongenital touch often complain of lack of arousal.

Exercises

Strategies for Increasing Your Comfort with Touching and Being Touched

Positive and Negative Associations to Touch

Make a copy of the following list of good and bad feelings about each. Date it and circle the feelings that apply to how *you* feel about touch.

Positive

Safety
Caring
Warmth
Soothing
Love

Negative

Fear
Controlling
Out of control
Pain
Awkward

Positive

Pleasure
Relaxation
Fun
Softness
Good memories
Comfort
Normal
Help
Connection
I'm worth touching
Calming
Indulgence
Massage
Deep breathing
Good mother

Good father
Sensuality
A worthwhile activity
Good sexual memories

Negative

Numb
Tense/anxiety
Guilt
Startle response
Bad memories
Discomfort
Weird
Danger
Confusion
What does this mean?
Jumpy
Is this proper?
Uptight
Holding breath
No mother, bad mother
No father, bad father
Boring
A waste of time
No sexual memories

For people who were profoundly deprived in childhood, you could make a similar list for extended eye contact.

After you have worked on the exercises in *Sex Smart* for a few months, go back and make another copy of the list of feelings about touch and circle the ones which apply. Compare the two lists.

Draw Your BodyMap

One of the best ways to discover how you feel about touch is to draw a BodyMap. Make two drawings of body outlines, one of the front of your body, and one of the back. Gather up three crayons or colored pencils, one blue, one red, and one green.

Now, imagine yourself in an affectionate, safe, and relaxed situation with someone you love romantically. Color in your two diagrams with the colored pencils or crayons, using this code:

RED = Do not ever touch me here under any circumstances.

BLUE = I may or may not want you to touch me here, depending on the situation and how I feel.

GREEN = I always like to be touched here.

Now, look at your BodyMap. If red or blue predominates, with very little green, it is likely that your ability to enjoy being sexual is severely hampered.

Which of the areas you colored in blue or red feel itchy or jumpy when they are touched? Take some time to think about what has happened in your family to create your own personal pattern of likes and dislikes for touch in each area of your body. Date your BodyMap for future reference, then read the following examples of what others have discovered.

Dalia looked at her BodyMap and found that it had quite a lot of blue, very little green, and enormous areas of red under her arms, and on her chest and feet and legs. She recalled some bad experiences with touch that have left her feeling uneasy about turning her body over to another person.

She commented, "From ages five to seven, my father tickled me against my will at bedtime 'til I had to call for my mother to stop him. Sometimes he stopped and sometimes he didn't. I liked the attention from my father because I loved him, but I got anxious and frustrated that he wouldn't let me control his behavior. It felt cruel and slightly sadistic. Even now, I find it hard to relax whenever my boyfriend, Bob, wants to hold me and cuddle."

Brian's body map was almost entirely blue. He only had the tiniest portion of green, on the top of his head. Looking at his BodyMap, he commented, "My family was very tentative about touch. Come to think of it, they almost never touched me. The only place I ever got touched was some small pats on the top of my head. I guess this explains why I have the green there, and only there, and probably explains why I feel so awkward touching my wife, Debby."

Share Your BodyMap

If you have a partner, you can work with your partner using the BodyMaps. Share them and explain where all of the colors/feelings come from.

Help each other to take blue areas and move them to a blue-green, and then to green. Always ask each other's permission to touch a particular area, and give each other feedback about how the touching feels. Never try to start out working on red areas, always on the blue ones. Redo your BodyMaps every three months or so, and compare them.

Look at Old Photographs

If you can't get many insights from drawing your BodyMap, there are other ways to recall your family's attitude about touch. Look at old photographs of you and your family at different ages. Who is touching whom, and in what ways? Are your parents touching? Are your parents touching the children? Do the patterns of touching change as the children get older?

Massage

Find a Massage Therapist

Go for a massage at least once a week over a long period of time. This can help you get in touch with your body and learn what types of touch you prefer. Be sure to communicate with your massage therapist to clarify your comfort level.

Take a Class Together

Massage is also a wonderful way for couples to support one another. By taking a massage class, you can learn how to use massage to help your partner with common ailments such as stiffness, soreness, or headaches caused by muscle tightness and stress. More important, you can learn about how to touch another lovingly, and how to be mindful of the intent that you put into your touch. And you can learn how to quiet yourself, center yourself, and listen to yourself and your partner.

Take a Class by Yourself

Sometimes, one member in a couple is so frustrated by the other partner's long-standing awkwardness with touching that bearing with that person through a couple's massage class would seem to create more anger. In that case, the problem would be best dealt with as a personal quest toward

learning more about touch. In this case, each person can work on their issues about touch alone.

Practicing Touch

Use Clay

If your partner complains that your physical contact is too hard or too soft, you can work on learning touches of different strengths by using a malleable material that keeps its shape such as clay to rehearse. For example, if your touch feels too rough to your partner, first squeeze a ball of clay in your normal fashion. Leave that ball of clay as a model, looking at the depth of the marks which you made in it. Let your partner demonstrate the kind of touch that would please him or her. Practice squeezing other same-sized balls of clay, making progressively more gentle squeezes, until you are producing a squeeze that is pleasurable to your partner. Practice on clay until you get to the point where you are able to consistently gauge the strength of your touch, and can find a level that is pleasurable for your partner.

If You Do Not Have a Partner

Perhaps you have serious barriers with touch and love which have kept you isolated from other people, so that you do not have friends or a partner with whom to practice touching techniques. As remarkable as it may seem, even very long-standing and profound fears about giving and receiving touch can be altered, over time, if you are committed, financially and emotionally, to the process.

Other ways to explore touch:

- Join a class in dance or dance therapy.
- Get a pet or spend more time with a pet you already have.
- Join a gym in your neighborhood. You could even find a personal trainer.

After a year of trying one or more of these strategies, draw a new set of BodyMaps. Then take out your first set of BodyMaps and compare your progress.