

Touch May Alleviate Existential Fears for People With Low Self-Esteem

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As human beings, we all know that we are going to die some day. Most of us deal with this knowledge by trying to live meaningful lives, but people with low self-esteem tend not to see their lives as particularly meaningful. Now, research suggests that touch may help people with low self-esteem in confronting their own mortality.

“Even fleeting and seemingly trivial instances of interpersonal touch may help people to deal more effectively with existential concern,” explains psychological scientist and lead researcher Sander Koole of VU University Amsterdam.

“This is important because we all have to deal with existential concerns and we all have times at which we struggle to find meaning in life,” says Koole. “Our findings show that people may still find existential security through interpersonal touch, even in the absence of symbolic meaning derived from religious beliefs or life values.”

In a series of studies published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), Koole and colleagues tested the hypothesis that people with low self-esteem deal with existential concerns by connecting with others.

In one study, an experimenter approached participants as they walked through a university campus. The experimenter handed the participants questionnaires to fill out; for some of the participants, she accompanied the questionnaire with a light, open-palmed touch on the participant’s shoulder blade that lasted about 1 second.

Interestingly, participants with low self-esteem who received the brief touch reported less death anxiety on the questionnaire than those who had not been touched.

Touch also seemed to act as a buffer against social alienation when participants were reminded of their mortality: Participants with low self-esteem showed no decreased in social connectedness after being reminded of death, but only if they had received a light touch.

The research suggests that individuals with low self-esteem may desire, and even seek out, touch when they are confronted with their mortality. Participants with low self-esteem who were reminded of death estimated the value of a plush teddy bear at about €23 (about \$31 USD), while those who had not been reminded of death estimated the value at about €13 euros, a full €10 less.

Being able to touch the teddy bear while estimating its value seemed to provide existential comfort to participants with low self-esteem, reducing their levels of ethnocentrism, a common defensive reaction to reminders of death.

“Our findings show that even touching an inanimate object — such as a teddy bear — can soothe existential fears,” notes Koole. “Interpersonal touch is such a powerful mechanism that even objects that simulate touch by another person may help to instill in people a sense of existential significance.”

While the existential benefits of touch may be limited by various factors — such as who or what is providing the touch — Koole and colleagues believe that touch could be a useful supplement to more traditional cognitive-based therapies in treating low self-esteem and related disorders, such as depression and anxiety.

The researchers are currently exploring the possibilities of simulated interpersonal touch through the use of a “haptic jacket,” which can electronically give people the feeling that they are being hugged.