



Compassionate Touch®: A Practical Tool that Eases Distress in People Living with Dementia

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NOTE:

This handout is intended as a foundation prior to the conference.
Additional materials will be provided at the session.

Why Touch Matters in Nursing Homes Today

1. Touch deprivation in old age is real.

Older adults living with serious medical conditions need the reassurance of human touch. Unfortunately, they are the least likely to receive expressive touch from health care providers.¹ Nursing students may even experience anxiety about touching older patients. At a time when, according to Ashley Montague, “tactile hunger is more powerful than ever”³ touch is withdrawn, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, poor trust in caregivers and insecurity.

2. Touch in caregiving is not all the same.

There are two basic kinds of touch that occur during caregiving: instrumental and expressive. Instrumental touch is necessary to perform a task or procedure. It occurs when we help someone get dressed or stand up from a chair and when we change a bandage or apply stretching exercises to a tight muscle. Expressive touch is offered spontaneously to show care, concern, reassurance, affection and empathy.

3. Touch is good “medicine”.

Presence combined with touch is a powerful combination. Two such reasons may be oxytocin and hard-wiring. Oxytocin is a neurotransmitter in the brain related to social behavior. Scientists call it the “care and connection” hormone. Touch stimulates production of oxytocin leading to feelings of safety, caring, trust, decreased stress and anxiety.

Zeisel, an innovator in the non-pharmacological treatment of dementia, tells us that capabilities of people living with dementia provide windows for connection and communication and an opportunity for a vibrant relationship. He points to universal hardwired human abilities, explaining that touch is one of these, along with emotions, singing and facial expressions. Even people with advanced dementia don’t lose the capacity to recognize a caring touch.

4. Why touch matters to the elder living in a care community.

While skilled touch offers many physical benefits including decreased anxiety, improved sleep and relief from pain, we shouldn’t overlook what may be even more important a person living in a nursing home: the bond of relationship. He needs to know that he is not only cared for but cared *about*. Simington relates that “Older persons report that touch conveys fondness, security, closeness, warmth, concern, and encouragement, and makes them feel an increased sense of trust and well-being. They report that touch helps them to develop close, trusting relationships with staff and other residents.

5. Why touch matters to the family of a person living with dementia.

Family members need a way to relate to their loved one when “normal” avenues of communication are limited. They may feel helpless in the face of a situation that is out of their control. Often families avoid visits simply because they don’t know what to say or do. Disengagement is the result. Skilled touch empowers family care-partners with a means to connect with their loved one, easing the awkward helplessness of a visit. Likewise when a family member witnesses the positive response of their loved one to touch given by another care partner, it leads to greater peace of mind and confidence in their choice of care community.

6. Why touch matters to the staff of care communities.

Frontline care- partners need practical tools to cope with challenges without adding to their work load. Intentional use of skilled touch can help ease the risk of caregiver burnout. Care partners report that expressive touch shifts the focus from a deteriorating body and outward behaviors to seeing the person inside the disease. Tournier, a proponent of 'medicine of the person', encouraged authentic communication with patients and recognized how it could improve the experience for healthcare professionals helping them to find greater satisfaction in their work.

Professionals experience touch as being mutual, giving comfort, calmness and well-being to themselves as well as to the receiver. Jan David Edvardsson

7. Why touch matters to eldercare providers.

Eldercare providers must have a marketing edge in a competitive industry. Consumers today expect providers to offer innovative programs that reflect the changing face of aging. An eldercare community with a touch program will be recognized as raising the standard of care.

Federal and state initiatives are calling upon all providers to equip care partners with practical tools that create positive outcomes and reduce unnecessary use of anti-psychotic medication by replacing [or supplementing] them with non-pharmacologic approaches and strategies.

8. Why touch matters to society.

I've thought about the use of various technologies and how they enhance lives of our elders. Many grandparents have discovered the 'Skype visit'. These long-distance visits can help families stay connected or help adult children monitor how Mom is doing. I believe that these "Skype-visits" are a good thing but I do wonder if some families will skip the trip to grandma's and substitute a Skype-visit instead. There's no substitute for an in-person visit where people share an experience; where grandparents feel and touch their grandchildren who then will remember what grandma's wrinkly skin felt like or the smell of her Jergen's lotion; where grown children take time to simply show up and be present. Technology will play a huge role in aging baby boomer's lives– but maybe we should keep some good old fashioned visits along with it.

Healthcare in today's high-tech world has become depersonalized. So much attention must be given to the technical aspects of medical care that the patient can feel lost in the shuffle. We can bring together the world of medical technology with the human side of care simply by reaching out and offering the gift of human touch. I love what Dr. Abraham Verghese had to say in a 2011 presentation: *"The most important innovation in medicine to come in the next 10 years: the power of the human hand."*¹⁴ I couldn't agree more!

(Article references available upon request.)



Compassionate Touch[®] is an evidence-informed approach combining skilled touch with compassionate presence to enhance quality of life for those in later life stages.

The holistic influence of Compassionate Touch[®] eases distress linked to behavioral expression.

- Increases body awareness increasing a sense of the physical self and alertness.
- Enhances trust in care-partners.
- Diffuses overwhelming confusion or anxiety.
- Builds a bridge of connection with people and surroundings.
- Helps to calm anxiety and agitation often based in fear and confusion.
- Eases the effects of isolation, loneliness and boredom.
- Acknowledges and affirms the individual *within*, encouraging feelings of worthiness and well-being.
- Eases physical discomfort and pain.
- Promotes restful sleep.
- Reduces resistance to care.
- Reduces care-partner stress.

Touching as a therapeutic event is not as simple as a mechanical procedure or a drug, because it is above all, an act of communication.

Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*

Touching patients with Alzheimer's disease can have huge effects on getting them to relax, make emotional connections with others, and reduce their symptoms of depression.

Susan Kuchinkas