

Building Bridges

Dear Reader,

If I asked you which of the five senses is the most exceptional from among all of the of them and why, what would be your answer? I'd guess that most of you would answer "touch" as it is the only sense that is not physically connected to your head – a good reply, but not the complete answer. The fact is that in addition to what you already know, the sense of touch is the only one that is the least affected by the ageing process. Here is the first clue to the rest of the article, which stresses the importance of touch during our entire lifecycle, specifically in our senior years.

As we get older, we deal with many physiological changes. One such physical change is a decrease in muscle mass,* which can lead to lowered muscular activity, calling for added efforts in achieving what is considered "normal functioning" (*muscle mass is a primary source of metabolic heat, generated by muscle contraction that produces normal muscular activity). Another significant sign of aging is fat depositions, weaker respiratory function, inflexibility, and more. We also encounter personal and social limitations that include anxiety, a sense that time is running out, a lack of routine and low self image in comparison to what you once "were".

Many physiological factors can produce positive effects to the aging process such as lowering fat, maintaining muscle strength, improving respiratory functioning, flexibility and balance, as well as achieving good cholesterol levels, keeping normal sugar-blood concentration, relaxation (endorphin release), and more.

Studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between physical exercise and emotional levels – regular exercise and sport lowers symptoms such as depression, fear and anxiety, and feelings of weariness and ill health. (Ross, C.E. & Hayes, D., 'Exercise and psychological well-being in the community', *Am. J. Epidemiology*, 1988, 127, pp. 762-71).

By staying healthy and maintaining a good level of self-esteem, we can maintain a well-balanced lifestyle as we age. As part of the aging process, we sometimes feel a little down and even depressed with the limitations caused by the physiological process. This often causes lowered self worth and results in our mind "falling asleep"

on us. Therefore, self-esteem plays a central role in our daily lives and is important for our confidence, self image, independence, and control over our bodies. By taking control and "doing for oneself" we in fact are promoting our health and keeping ourselves happy.

Exercise and movement allow us to improve our aging process and maintain a healthy mental state and higher levels of happiness. Regular physical activity enhances our flexibility, strength, suppleness in our joints, respiratory function, concentration, coordination, relaxation and composure, and increased self worth.

Most importantly, emotional support fulfills a real human need by promoting friendship and togetherness as a cure to loneliness. Our first experience of healing is through the sense of touch. When we fell as a small child our mothers "rubbed it better" and so we learn at a very early and tender stage in our development to associate touch with love and healing. Doctors today are accused by their patients of sitting at the wrong side of the desk and never touching the patient in therapy only in diagnosis.

To ensure healthy social and physiological well-being, it is imperative that we keep the basic instincts of touch and communication intact. Infants and children seek physical contact from their caregivers, and all forms of mature relationships between adults require physical touch to symbolize mutual recognition and understanding, such as a hand-shake, pat on the back, embrace, etc. Movement is also a life necessity and is as essential as food, sleep, and touch. It plays a significant part in shaping our body image and self perception. Thus, movement in combination with the healing properties of touch, contribute to building self understanding that in turn creates a positive body image, enhances our desire to increase body action, and helps produce positive interactions with others at all of life's stages, from the fetal stage through to the golden years.

Today, in our hectic modern lifestyle, the offering and acceptance of emotional support is harder to come by, as profoundly stated by the international bestselling author John Naisbitt in his book *High Tech High Touch*, "By relentlessly accelerating our lives, technology stirs profound yearnings for a more emotionally satisfying existence."

Modern life has changed human activities and habits, which concern the way we move, work and even communicate. Long durations of being seated, for example, affect our muscles that are forced into a continuous contracted state, and result in aching joints and shallow breath that cause back, neck and shoulder pains. The best way to relieve these symptoms is through regular exercise and movements that focus on opening the chest area encourage deep breathing, to help release and relax common physical discomforts brought on with age such as “dormant” joints by stimulating blood flow to reduce painful and confined movement. It is a fact that the older we get the less we move. Look at a young child, they never stop moving □ like a bee seeking pollen they continuously wander from place to place experiencing the world through touch and movement. A grandfather on the other hand, moves less and less, preferring to spend the majority of his day sleeping in the sun and enjoying the "quite life" at the end of his days.

By stimulating our sense of touch and integrating regular exercise and movements designed to relax, stimulate correct breathing processes and blood flow we will lead a healthier and happier lifestyle well into our senior years.

Best wishes for an active, healthy and happier life.

Gilad Naaman

Gilad Naaman Perry
Tel: + 972 52 477 2052
info@tnuad.com
www.tnuad.com

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