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THE METAPHORIC HUG: A SECRET MEDICINAL

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“Hugs are the Universal Medicine” —

Author Unknown

The other day while waiting for an elevator outside our office, a man who was waiting to be seen by one of our physicians and who I had taken care of in the past but had not seen in several years suddenly saw me. He paused, looked twice, then literally ran up to me, threw his arms around me, and gave me an old-fashioned bear hug before he ever said a word. Everything he said and did after that paled in importance. In essence, that was his greeting, having ascertained that I was not only still alive but looking quite well. That gesture started me thinking about hugs.

Hugs have been described as a form of physical intimacy, practiced publicly or privately without stigma in many countries, cultures, and religions, within families, and across age groups and gender.¹ It is a favorite subject in the art world. A hug is generally a short, light embrace reflecting a show of affection or emotional warmth on joyful occasions or on greeting someone. Hugs may have health benefits, having been shown to raise oxytocin levels and to reduce blood pressure.²

I did not grow up in a hugging family, nor even a kissing family. Handshakes were the rule of the day. We were a rather formal family. It was a wonderful, loving environment — just not very demonstrative. I'm not sure what has transpired over the years, and although the handshake remains the customary greeting, hugging seems more prevalent and certainly more acceptable under the right circumstances today than of yore. My wife has always been a hugger, and she morphed her hugging habits to our three sons. Now we all three hug one another needing very little provocation. The habit also extends to other family members — not necessarily a bear hug, but with feeling nonetheless.

Hugging, I believe, represents a certain degree of acceptance, a certain sense of warmth, and certainly respect earned over a period of time. It is said that a hug is a handshake from the heart. And giving a hug almost always brings a hug in return. It's like a boomerang; you get it back right away. Because I was not reared in a hug culture, it took me a while to become accustomed to the hugs that began to come from both women and male patients over the years. I eventually learned never to turn down a hug because I knew it came with a special meaning. I have even learned to hug trees, especially the big old ones.³ So when that patient gave me a bear hug in front of many to see, I knew it carried a very heartfelt message. If a picture is worth a thousand words, so is a hug. And sometimes hugs say it better than any words. As I have matured, I have become an equal-opportunity hugger. I don't discriminate, but just as respect and trust must be earned, so must hugs.

If one observes carefully, there are several different kinds of hugs, each carrying a different message. There is, for example, the pseudo-hug you often see on television between politicians (usually of the same political persuasion) — more a gesture than a hug. No warmth there, just a perfunctory gesture preceded by a handshake.

Then there is the social hug, usually among women with a cheek-to-cheek peck, maybe checking out the latest fragrance? Those are not the kinds of hugs that convey anything more than a perfunctory greeting, the current social gesture of familiarity. Other variations of hugs include cuddling and spooning — a form of prolonged hugging, and snuggling or “kanoodling” (coined by psychiatrist Alexander Althoff), which is a more intimate form of cuddling.

Hugs are more symbolic than letters or words. They carry no sexual or racial overtones. They are more common from women than men but can be learned by both. They tend to come without reservation and represent the ultimate expression of appreciation. “Hug someone your appreciation” is a term occasionally used.

Perhaps a physician should be measured by the number of hugs per patient population, a “hug index” of sorts. Huggers don't have to be literate, and there are no contraindications except perhaps for body odor. Drew Barrymore once said, “I love hugging. I wish I were an octopus so I could hug ten people at one time.” A friend of mine has a sign on his office door, “Hug Department. Always Open.”

But in the medical field, I believe a real hug between patient and physician is, in essence, a reward for professionalism; a sign of gratitude and a signal that you are not only his or her physician but also a trusted friend. So embrace the hug when the opportunity arises. Accept it for the affection and appreciation it bestows. That is a tell-tale sign from the patient that you have arrived. For those who have not arrived, it may be time to look at your interpersonal and inter-patient relationships.

As a cardiologist, this quote from an unknown source seems to sum it up: “A hug is two hearts wrapped in arms.”

Then, if I may be original:

A Hug really comes from the Heart.

It's not just served a la carte.

It's earned every day

By what we do and what we say

And received with grace, if we're smart.

References

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