

Does Touch Improve Quality of Life of People with Alzheimer's Disease?

Ann Catlin, OTR, LMT

Touch deprivation in old age is real. Simington (1995) relates:

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. As tactile sensitivity decreases, the need to receive expressive touch may increase. Nature can be cruel however, and the elderly person often may have no one to provide this increased touch. The children are gone and the partner has died. One elderly woman put it this way, "Sometimes I hunger to be held. But he is the one who would have held me. He is the one who would have stroked my head. Now there is no one. No comfort."

Touch is one of our most basic human needs that endure our entire lifetime. Clearly our situation, age and condition changes, but the need for human contact does not. As Simington pointed out, as the body or mind declines, the need for human touch may increase as we search for reassurance and comfort.

Touch in the form of gentle and sensitive massage or attentive holding has the power to enhance physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. A hand massage, back massage or simply holding a person's hand has the power to elicit positive, life-affirming feelings and responses. Touch becomes a language of the human heart and a remembrance of one's place in the world.

Compassionate Touch[®] is a complementary approach combining skilled touch with compassionate presence to enhance quality of life for those in later life stages. More than a set of techniques, it is a way of relating that brings true change to the lives of people for whom nurturing human touch is just a memory.

An underlying principle is that we each have within us a compassionate presence. Skilled touch is the medium used to offer the gift of this natural presence.

Unique Benefits of Compassionate Touch[®]:

- Increased body awareness increasing a sense of the physical self and alertness.
- Reassurance and trust, diffusing overwhelming confusion or anxiety.
- Builds a bridge of connection with people and activity in immediate 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.
- Reduces physical discomfort and promotes restful sleep.

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Dr. Allen Powers, author of *Dementia Beyond Drugs* an advocate of touch in dementia care adds to the conversation:

Modalities like massage...can provide a balm for anyone who is in need of more human connection. I will confess that I have occasionally ordered moisturizing creams twice as often as needed for people with dementia who are disengaged merely to increase the frequency of hands-on contact.

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Sources:

Power, A. (2010) *Dementia Beyond Drugs*, Health Professions Press, Baltimore, MD 21285

Simington, Jane, RN, PhD (1995) [The Power of Expressive Touch](#) *Humane Medicine Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 4.