

Tom Durkin: Confessions of an oxytocin junkie

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Tom Durkin | Other Voices

I need a hug.

I didn't know how much hugs meant to me until we couldn't hug each other for fear of killing each other.

What does that do to our feelings of trust?

I was raised without physical affection. I didn't know what I was missing, but part of me knew something vital was MIA. Fortunately, I found it in touchy-feely Northern California.

Although I'll never be named father of the year, I raised my son with all the love and affection I could give him. It gives me great joy to see his children treating him like a jungle gym. They know they are loved.

Research has recently revealed that our pets also experience the same oxytocin rush as we get from affectionate physical touch. Oxytocin is the hormone the pituitary gland in our brains secretes when we experience physical affection, ranging from hugs to sex to childbirth to breastfeeding. It is often referred to as the "cuddle hormone" or "love hormone."

Women have more oxytocin than men. Perhaps that's why they hug more than men do?

In a horrific experiment in 1944, 20 newborn infants were fed, changed and bathed but given no love or affection. Half the babies died within four months. Several more died later. The few survivors grew up with severe intellectual and emotional problems.

So, is hugging going to be a casualty of the pandemic? Are we going to lose the human touch?

After a long time of relatively low rates of infection, the coronavirus pandemic is hitting Nevada County like a train wreck. The Thanksgiving spike is just peaking, and it's not looking like it's going to be a merry Christmas or happy New Year.

We know two things: COVID-19 spreads from ill-advised holiday gatherings. People are going to gather anyway.

The low rate of infection we enjoyed in Nevada County seems to have dulled some people into careless complacency — and fueled other people's delusions that the pandemic is just a hoax and wearing masks is an evil liberal scheme to violate their constitutional rights. I guess they believe their personal rights trump the public health rights of everybody else.

Actually, not wearing a mask is not your personal right. Wearing a mask is your personal responsibility. It's not about you. It's about us.

Because it jeopardizes public safety, you don't have a right to yell "Fire!" in a theater. And because not wearing a mask jeopardizes public safety, you don't have a right not to wear a mask in a public place or business.

By asserting your right, you are violating everybody else's right to public safety. Your rights end where ours begin.

So, suck it up, buttercup. Wear a mask. Social distance. Be a real patriot. Don't be a vector or a victim. The longer you're out in the world without a mask, the longer the pandemic is going to be around, because you are, literally, the face of the pandemic.

More than 300,000 people — fellow Americans — have already died. And that's not counting the several million "long-haulers" who survived — but did not recover — from COVID-19. They are disabled by long-term to permanent lung, heart and/or brain damage among other maladies.

In addition to persuading people to mask up, the best hope we have to stop the pandemic is vaccinations. Of course, the reactionary anti-vaxxers are already spewing all kinds of pseudoscience and conspiracy theories as to why we shouldn't get the vaccine.

I'm looking at the vaccine this way: I know COVID-19 can make me very, very sick and quite possibly kill me — or make me wish it ' I'll take my chances with the vaccine.

This is a strange and terrible time. We are divided when we should be united. To quote Walt Kelly's comic strip Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Until we come together in a united front to fight the pandemic, we are curdling the milk of human kindness. We are losing that essential quality of life – the human touch.

Until the pandemic is over and/or we're vaccinated, we must resign ourselves to air hugs, blown kisses, and X's, O's and sad little emojis in emails and texts.

XOXOX

Tom Durkin lives in Nevada City.

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