

Is Touch in Romantic Relationships Universally Beneficial for Psychological Well-Being? The Role of Attachment Avoidance

Debrot et al. (2021)

Does a fear of intimacy benefit any less from touches (e.g. hugging) ?

3 Studies were done

One with 1,604 American participants in romantic relationships who completed questionnaires reporting their well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, mental well-being, positive affect...), and how much they touched each other

One with 66 Californian couples who were brought in to have conversations on moments they've felt strong love for their partner or were suffering personally after which we counted how much they touched each other and they reported their positive affect (e.g., feelings of joy or happiness)

And one with 98 couples who completed questionnaires daily for 28 days reporting on how much they touched each other their felt positive affect.

For all participants they had assessed their attachment anxiety (i.e., fear of abandonment) and avoidance (i.e., fear of intimacy)

What did we find?

touch (e.g., kissing, hugging) was found to be associated with well-being (e.g., feeling happy, joy), and that those who had a fear of intimacy (i.e., avoidant) were less likely to touch their partner and as such were less likely to experience greater well-being. Their partners were also reported feeling lower positive affect daily.

And more importantly...

all participants experienced the benefits of greater well-being in response to touch, regardless of whether they were avoidant or not -- contrary to the empirical finding demonstrating that people who are avoidant report enjoying touch less.

So what?

People who are avoidant enjoy the benefits of greater well-being associated touch just as much as those who are less avoidant, and this paper demonstrates this notion via self-reports and reports from both partners through both observation and across time.