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Losing touch with Touch:

Why reincorporating physical contact through contact improvisation is beneficial

The first sense we experience as newborns is touch. It is vital to our existence as humans- playing a large role in our emotional health. Skin to skin contact of a mother and a newborn is highly recommended due to its many benefits when transitioning the baby from the womb to the world; this gives the baby good bacteria, stabilizes their body temperature and steadies their first breaths to the mothers patterns that they are familiar with (“10 Benefits of Skin-to-Skin Contact”). If physical contact as a child is fundamental to our health and growth, why does it tend to become neglected the older we get? While many factors play a role in this common propulsion away from physical contact, others of the same age are finding themselves rolling around with each other on the floor, lifting one another and entangling body parts with their friends or even strangers. This activity often takes place in a dance studio, but more specifically a contact improvisation class. This class invites everyone, no matter what dance experience, age, size, gender, race or disability, to join one another in physical contact. Those who take contact improvisation classes leave feeling more connected with their community, their own mind and body, and the Earth’s floor. I argue that contact improvisation helps reincorporate the many benefits of touch which are often neglected as we mature.

The role of touch as we grow older can be pushed away due to a desire for independence, the displeasure with our changing bodies as we mature or the unsureness with what other's boundaries are. Although physical contact is another form of communication that every body can speak, many hinder themselves from participating due to discomfort or embarrassment. Factors such as, gender, relationship and personal experiences play a large role in ones comfortability with touch. Males and females respond fairly different to touch in certain areas of the body. While men experience less discomfort when touched on the chest by various people, women experience much more discomfort (Buchanan, Rose Troup). Due to the anatomy of each of the sexes, what we consider our "private" parts differ; none the less they are called private for similar reasons: they are not for others to openly see or touch. However, when we are young and haven't fully understood the opposing sexes anatomy there is no reason to be uncomfortable. In a study published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, it was stated that "both sexes reported less discomfort overall when being touched by a woman" (Buchanan, Rose Troup). Perhaps this is due to the caring role of a woman having a motherly and tender touch that makes it feel more acceptable for contact. While the opposing male role supports strength and power, which can make one hesitant towards physical contact. Most of the time, gender will not play a conscious role, rather a programmed idea society has framed that we do not recognize until we are older, with whether certain touch is appropriate or not.

Relationships between people are often the deciding factor when it comes to contact. Whether it is a parent, sibling, acquaintance, relative, coworker, partner, friend or stranger will determine where, if at all, a person might feel comfortable with contact. The same study as mentioned prior stated that some men reported discomfort just when touching hands with an uncle

(Buchanan, Rose Troup). Whereas women were more open to touch most places on the body from other women or even men they were close with, most of them drew the line at acquaintances and strangers touching their hands as well. The only person people tend to feel comfortable receiving touch anywhere on the body is their partner (Buchanan, Rose Troup). Again, this is not a relationship we have as children, instead we receive physical contact from almost everyone as a child. Whether a father rocks his child to sleep, or a relative playfully wrestles with the child, or an acquaintance is asked to hold a child, contact is frequently reoccurring; therefore, normalizing touch from a variety of relationships. As we grow older and touch is less necessary because we no longer need to rock a child to sleep, or entertain them, or hold them so they don't run off, the lack of continuous contact begins to separate out who provides comfort or discomfort with touch. Based on the closeness of our relationships throughout life, we determine who we feel comfortable receiving touch from.

Our personal experiences in life establish what our physical contact caliber is. For some, who come from a very affectionate family, contact with others is inevitable and comes naturally. While others, having a different family dynamic, desire not to be touched. A strong rejection of touch is called 'tactile defensiveness,' and is due to "physical hypersensitivity," finding touch "painful, overwhelming, repulsive or distracting, or too personal and invasive" ("Tactile Sensitivity"). Common in children, but also seen in adults, tactile defensiveness can be reversed by slowly integrating more tactile sensory into the person's life. For a person who has experienced any kind of physical abuse, it is important to gradually reincorporate physical contact into their life to support their mental health because "humans suffer from social isolation but react positively to physical contact. This has to do with the fact that when we hug someone, a hormone

called Oxytocin is released in our body, which effectively reduces our stress levels. Additionally, our blood pressure sinks and we experience less anxiety during a hug” (“The Human Touch: a Neglected Feeling”). As you can see, our personal experiences may lead some to avert touch but, it is vital to our health that we integrate tactile sensory into our lives.

Understanding the importance of maintaining physical contact throughout ones life is the first step in cultivating a harmonious mind and body relationship. Next, one must demonstrate the practice of touch in their daily routine. A great way to begin this journey is enrolling in contact improvisation classes. Through these classes, one will become reacclimatized to the physical contact that they may have drifted away from. Contact improvisation is defined as “a form of dance which incorporates elements from sporting movement and gymnastics, yoga, martial arts, philosophies of socio-sexual equality, and modern theatre practices of physical ensemble playing (Mock, Roberta).” With disregard to standard size, weight and strength for pairing of partners, contact improvisation utilizes the spontaneity of creation between two unique bodies. Focusing on the process rather than the product allows improvisers to trust and support one another no matter the outcome; as long as each persons main goal is connecting the mind and body (Mock, Roberta).

Although this may sound intimidating, especially for those who are not use to physical contact or the art form of dance, contact improvisation is open for anyone to learn and explore at their own pace. “Contact improvisers have often stressed the social nature of their activity as much as its formal, physical properties. Unlike other American theater dance forms, contact improvisation was and is often practiced by groups of people in informal, open social setting (“jams”).” They “sometimes claimed their dancing is a kind of folk dance, something that any-

one can participate in and learn” (Novack, Cynthia Jean). To further decrease the intimidation factor, attending a contact improvisation class does not even require you to fully participate in the action. In fact, it is common for participants to take a step back and observe what others are doing for however long they chose before reentering the “jam.”

An example, provided by Roberta Mock, with her experience of how a contact improvisation class might be laid out goes as follows:

“They begin with a thorough warm-up which includes shiatsu massage to relax muscles. Most of the preliminary exercises concentrate on developing the spine as the focus for giving and taking weight. These progress to training exercises in falling and tumbling. It was while rolling across the floor in a banana shape that I decided my rigid body was unsuited to this type of activity. Only by looking across the mats at Karen, who is paraplegic and merrily unconcerned about appearing 'foolish', did I gain the confidence to attempt the next exercise. I lay on the floor, hurled my leg into the air from the hip and tried to swing my body around in a circle. I was inept but slightly less self-conscious. The last hour of the session is spent doing contact improvisation itself. We begin gently by accepting a partner's full weight while kneeling on all fours and end up by rolling about on the floor in a heap, exploring areas of contact and resistance.” (Mock, Roberta)

However, some classes may be constructed differently; a guided class will allow the dancer to learn the fundamentals of contact improvisation whereas a non-guided class allows the participants to explore on their own. For most people beginning contact improvisation, a guided class that breaks down the fundamentals will help ease them into this new style. Steve Paxton, the modern dancer who “invented” contact improvisation in 1972 after investigating new move-

ment ideas with colleagues and students believed that in one week of studies, a student could learn the fundamentals of contact improvisation; the equivalent to “about 30 hours or so of instruction. This was primarily to differentiate their explorations from something like modern dance or ballet where it takes many years of study before one has a solid grasp of the basics. It also assumed someone already engaged in athletic, dynamic physical activity. While it takes some time to be introduced, it takes far less than many other practices and therefore the entry point into the practice is relatively more accessible. Of course, time to become familiar with the fundamentals will depend on the person and the instructor” (Novack, Cynthia Jean). No matter the experience of the student, contact improvisation welcomes all to explore a world of touch and weight sharing.

Some of the fundamentals discussed and explored in a contact improvisation class include: physics, the stand or the “small dance,” rolling point of contact, falling and rolling, weight exchange, counter balance, off-balance, alignment, structure, body-use and organization, physical listening, basic lift vocabulary and principles, readiness, “no hands” dance, opening up the back space, and the ouija dance (“Fundamentals of Contact Improvisation”). The common factor between all of these principles is the sensory response of the person; one must learn how to listen, follow, and react to the different impulses that are developed through a blind dance.

Some of these fundamentals may sound limiting, however “one should feel a freedom to adapt these explorations to one’s particular body, and in fact they are put out as a reference point for exploration and not the thing itself” (“Fundamentals of Contact Improvisation”). In fact, investigation of people with different physiologies and minds such as cerebral palsy and autism showed the need for adaptation of the core values of contact improvisation (“Fundamentals of

Contact Improvisation”). However, these adaptations were highlighted as opportunities for the participant to further their own personal exploration of movement, rather than as a hinderance to their capabilities.

Contact Improvisation is giving females the opportunity to feel strong and powerful, as well as men the opportunity to feel sensitive and delicate. Breaking down the gendered walls that society has established, contact improvisation strips those of their labels and reconnects people as pure humans. Novack states that, “It has also changed the quality of the touch in dance....a hand gesture used to have an emotional charge or form a linear design. Now, it is not just presentational or expressive, it is supportive (Novack, Cynthia Jean).” The physical support that contact improvisation allows individuals to experience is empowering for many. As is the opposing side; allowing the mind and body to trust another persons support as well as their own intuition to keep themselves safe as weight is shared. Roberta Mock states her point of view on support and touch by stating:

“As a tense, non-dancing, large woman, I have been conditioned to believe that my weight cannot be supported and that all touching is primarily sexual. Contact improvisation, for me, is both a frightening and liberating adventure. - Body contact improvisation sessions, University of Plymouth, Douglas Avenue, Exmouth, Devon (0395 255411)” (Mock, Roberta).

In contact improvisation, women who may have suffered physical abuse from a man are relearning and building trust with men throughout class. Men are also experiencing physical contact with both men and women in a non-sexualized way during contact improvisation. Opening a safe

environment for men and women to explore touch, contact improvisation is aiding many overcome their fears and self doubts.

The original contact improvisers of the early 70's "viewed the experience of touching and sharing weight with a partner of either sex and any size as a way of constructing a new experience of the self interacting with another person" (Novack, Cynthia Jean). When both dancers commit to this interaction, they flow through movement in an organic nature. This practice, while beneficial to the masses, is highly beneficial for dancers. Dancers engage in more physical contact than most due to the hands on nature of their field. However, contact improvisation allows dancers to collaborate and truly connect to others in a more naturalistic manner compared to the touch they usually receive during class or within a performance that is merely a tactile act rather than a true communicative experience.

Year by year as we grow older, we lose touch with touch. The physical contact we receive as child diminishes through our adolescence and adulthood, often hindering our mind and body relationship. In order to rebuild and reconnect to ourselves and others, it is vital to continue the practice of physical contact throughout one's life. Take a leap, or rather a fall and roll, into the world of contact improvisation to make touch a priority within life. The act of touch will greatly improve mental health and physical health through movement. Although maturing brings along many of the driving factors of 'tactile defensiveness,' touch can always be relearned ("Tactile Sensitivity"). Contact improvisation provides a safe and comfortable space for *anyone* to experience and explore touch.

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