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Social Touch at the Intersection of Reappraisal and Daily Stress

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Summary The relational, psychological, and physical benefits of touch are clear. Current study examines the role of interpersonal touch within the context of cognitive reappraisal and people's daily stressors. Using a 10-day daily diary study, within-person analysis showed that experiencing more touch than one's own average attenuates the negative link between cognitive reappraisal and stress, which suggests that people may not need to use cognitive reappraisal as they would normally do when coping with their daily stressors.

Keywords · Touch · Reappraisal · Daily Stress
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Introduction We begin to relate to others through touch as we were often held, nurtured, tickled, carried, and breastfed when we were infants.¹ Although touch may seem simple in its form—a hug, or hand placed on the back – those actions are supported by a complex system of communication. For example, touch relates to soothing² and reduced heart rate.³ Furthermore, it has been repeatedly found to buffer people against emotional distress, anxiety and negative feelings across different cultures, infants, and non-human species.^{4, 5, 6, 7} However, we still know very little about their role as a regulatory strategy.

Aims In fact, Rodrigues and Kross (2023)⁸ argued that touch, as a sensory experience, can be harnessed as a tool to promote emotion regulation. However, empirical evidence is limited. Thus, current research aims to target that gap in the literature. To address this overarching goal, we asked: (Q1) Do experiences of daily social touch relate to daily (a) subjective wellbeing, (b) decreased negative, (c) and increased positive affect; (Q2) How do experiences of daily interpersonal touch influence the relationship between stress and the cognitive reappraisal which is proven to be an already effective strategy?

Methods Participants were 79% Female 97 UC Berkeley undergraduate students ($M_{age} = 20.78$, $SD_{age} = 2.74$; 24% White, 29% Asian American, 2% African American, 3% Latino/a). They initially filled out baseline trait touch assessment using "Comfort with Interpersonal Touch Scale" (Webb & Peck, 2015; 7 pt: Strongly agree). Then, they were sent 5-min daily surveys each day for 10 consecutive days in which they reflected on a daily stressor. After the reflection, they reported on the level of stress they felt (7 pt: Extremely), positive and negative affect (7 pt: Extremely), and

subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction, 7 pt: Extremely). We then measured cognitive reappraisal (7: Strongly agree), and the frequency of touch they experienced on a given day (4 pt: Often).

Results Within-person analysis in which daily observations nested under individuals and intercepts and slopes were allowed to vary randomly showed that controlling for trait touch, experiencing more touch than one's own average predicts higher subjective wellbeing ($\beta_{std} = .07$, CI [.04, .10]), lower negative affect ($\beta_{std} = .07$, CI [-.12, -.02]), but not necessarily increased positive affect ($\beta_{std} = .03$, CI [-.04, -.10]) after people reflected on a daily stressor. Furthermore, we found that daily social touch attenuated the negative cognitive reappraisal and stress link ($\beta_{touch*reappraisal} = .20$, $SE = .10$, $t(804) = 2.03$, 95% CI [0.01 – 0.40], $p < .01$).

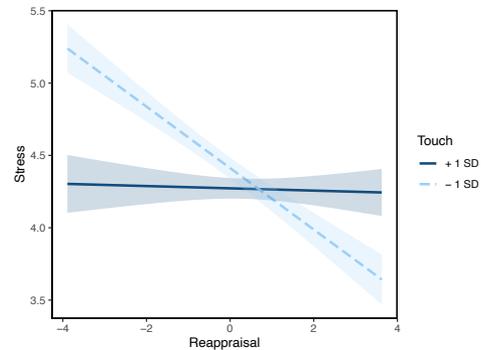


Figure 1: Interaction of Touch*Reappraisal on Stress

Conclusions Our results replicated previous findings of touch on increased daily wellbeing, lower negative affect, but not necessarily on increased positive affect. Considering the current study was within the context of stress, not reporting increased positive affect after reflecting on a stressor is not surprising. Furthermore, significant interaction between touch and reappraisal on daily stressors suggests that when people experience more touch than they would normally do within a given day, they do not need to exert reappraisal to cope with their stressor as they would normally do because touch may already function as a coping mechanism.

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References: ¹Keltner (2009); ²Gray, Watt, & Blass (2000); ³Aureli, Preston, & De Waal (1999); ⁴Field et al. (1998); ⁵Debrot et al. (2013); ⁶Coan et al. (2017); ⁷Jakubiak et al. (2017); ⁸ Rodrigues and Kross (2023).