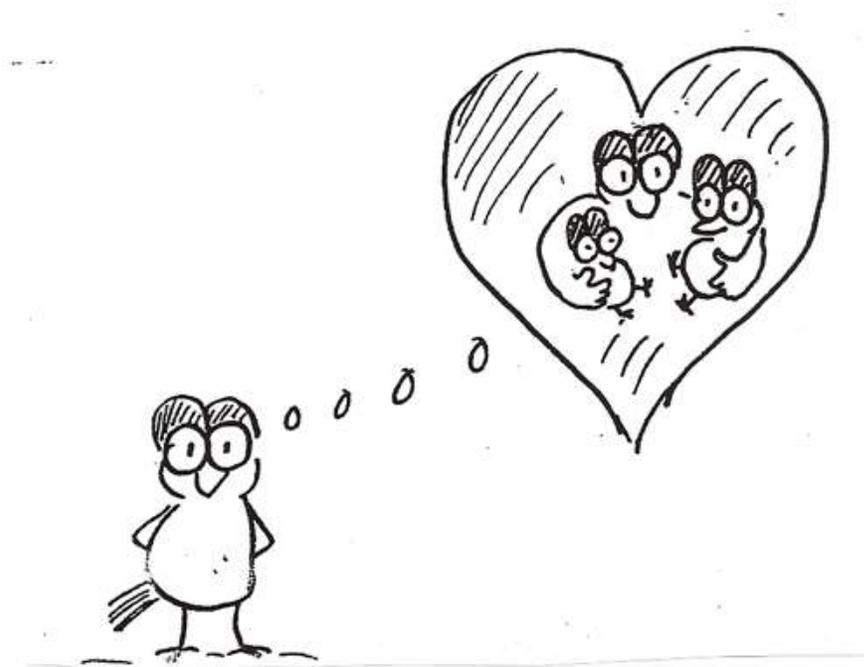


## **Touch in Healthcare**

Jeanne Shepard, MS, OTR/L

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We've all been told about the benefits of touch and physical contact to communicate concern and caring to ill family members. We know too that physical contact can open people to sharing feelings, concerns and lead to greater closeness. But, if you're like me, being "touchy-feely" isn't something that was part of your family's relationship style. We can know the benefits of touch in a rational way, but it isn't possible to suddenly switch modes of relating just because a family member is seriously ill. Forcing oneself to interact in a way that doesn't feel right and natural is not the answer. We are more likely to communicate our discomfort more than anything else, if we try to override our feelings about touch. And we do not want to impose touch on someone who may be uncomfortable with it because we know that it's supposed to be "therapeutic." (Think about how you felt the last time someone you hardly knew insisted on giving you a hug, because "people need to be hugged!")



***We are not all brought up to feel comfortable with touch.***

With these things in mind, how do we make touch non-invasive and safe, so we can reap the benefits? One way is to have a reason to touch. Personal care activities, such as grooming, hair brushing and applying lotion legitimize touch. I know one reason I enjoy getting my hair styled is that I have someone with whom I have a regular relationship wash, comb and handle my hair in a caring way. It's not an accident that women have been confiding in their hairdressers for years.

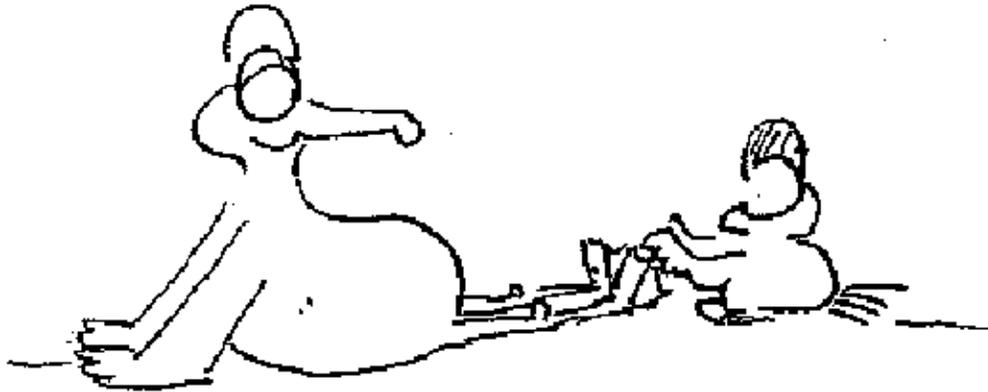
I've noticed, over the years that I've been an occupational therapist, that helping someone with personal care, like showering, seems to reduce barriers to communication. I notice that when I help someone over several months, that barriers fall. One delightful older woman whose back I've scrubbed for several weeks says, in a gruff voice, "Honey, I can tell you anything, woman to woman!" This sense of connection is one of the real rewards of the work I do.

Other self care activities that can provide a safe sense of connection can include giving someone a simple manicure, brushing their hair, applying lotion, or helping them shave.



*How can I make touch okay?*

Another way to provide a legitimate excuse to touch someone is to offer some sort of bodywork. However, many people who are uncomfortable about being touched may feel that a full body massage in which they are expected to disrobe and be covered with a sheet is too invasive. For that reason, I feel that Reflexology, which focuses on the hands and the feet, is ideal. In the years that I have been practicing Reflexology, I have only met two people who did not enjoy having their hands or feet touched.



*You can practice Reflexology on friends.*

My objective in this article is to explore ways of increasing safety in touch, possibly by learning a simple bodywork technique. It is not in the scope of an article to adequately describe bodywork techniques, and, if you choose to do that, I suggest you take a short course. A local massage school may have a weekend course, or the local community college may have a continuing education course.

## **SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER**

The following guidelines apply for any type of bodywork.

Your client may not be able to tell you if something is uncomfortable. Watch the face for grimacing, or for any pulling away.

Less is always safer, when you are trying something new.  
Always check your nails on your own skin first; to make sure you don't need to file them back.

*“If your mind is not in your hands,  
Ten thousand techniques are not enough.  
-Teshu*

I like to think of doing bodywork as an opportunity to be mindful. Your being attentive is the key to really engaging with your patient or client. If you are thinking about your errands or vacation, they will know it, somehow. Try to do bodywork techniques when you can be really present and attentive.

## **IF YOU CHOOSE TO LEARN REFLEXOLOGY**

Soak feet, if possible. Have the client sit in a comfortable chair and place their feet in a basin of warm water. Use benign essential oils, like lavender. Go by your subject's sensitivity. Some people do not like scent. Use pure oils, not synthetic blends.

Check out the feet, looking for skin break down, swelling, bruises, etc.

Apply oil/lotion. Cover foot not working on with towel.

Learn the routine you've been taught thoroughly, so you don't need to distract yourself by doing more than just glancing at notes.

Allow your subject to speak freely. I find that most people are slightly uncomfortable at being touched at first, and make themselves feel in control of the situation by talking, asking questions, etc. It is important to be responsive to the feel of what is going on, as well as the content of the statements, etc. Eventually, most people relax. My clients tend to drift off, asleep. To get the most benefit out of the session, be responsive to what the client needs.

## RESOURCES

[http://www.internationalreflexologyassociation.com/home/index.php?site\\_config\\_id=10&page\\_selection=67](http://www.internationalreflexologyassociation.com/home/index.php?site_config_id=10&page_selection=67)

<http://www.seattle-reflexology.com/index.html>  
(this site includes reflexology links)

*Jeanne Shepard is both an occupational therapist and a reflexologist. She has practiced reflexology in hospices and day health programs for patients with AIDS.*