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On the importance of social touch for senior individuals and ways to ameliorate social isolation: Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

Ans I.M. Tummers-Heemels¹, Wijnand A. IJsselsteijn
Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, Netherlands

Abstract: The need for touch exists below the horizon of consciousness. Interpersonal touch, or gentle physical contact between individuals, is an important aspect of human social interaction and has been shown to have numerous benefits for senior individuals. One of the main ways that interpersonal touch can benefit senior individuals is by reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated social distancing measures to mitigate the negative health consequences of the pandemic, which were particularly pronounced amongst vulnerable populations, especially those who live with dementia. At the same time, seniors' psychosocial wellbeing was compromised as opportunities for interpersonal touch became severely restricted.

In this paper, we share what we have learned during the pandemic both on the critical importance of social touch for senior individuals, as well as on innovative ways to ameliorate the forced absence of social touch. Through a targeted literature review and an online survey study, our findings highlight the fact that social relationships and physical contact are key to personal wellbeing and underline the importance of social touch at an advanced age.

Keywords. Dementia, senior individuals, social touch, COVID-19, affective haptics, quality of life, nursing

1. Introduction

Social touch is a fundamental aspect of human interaction and communication, and it has been shown to have numerous positive effects on physical and mental well-being. As people age, social touch becomes even more crucial, particularly for seniors who often experience physical and emotional changes that can impact their quality of life. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the role of social touch in the lives of seniors, and its potential benefits in improving their health and well-being. Studies have shown that touch can promote feelings of social connection and belonging. Subjective pleasantness ratings of slowly stroking touch even increase with age [15,19]. Additionally, touch has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, which are common issues for seniors, particularly those living in long-term care facilities .

Interpersonal touch can help to lower blood pressure, to improve sleep quality, increase comfort levels and improve immune function [1,9]. In addition to the direct benefits of touch, it can also help seniors to maintain their emotional balance. Behavioral and psychological problems of older people with dementia are ameliorated after receiving massage or touch [14]. From the point of view of nurses in care settings, interpersonal touch enhances their own ability to comfort and to promote emotional attachment, making their work more personally satisfying, which has been shown to diminish the risk of burn-out [5,16].

¹ Corresponding Author: Ans Tummers-Heemels, Human-Technology Interaction Group, Eindhoven University of Technology, PO Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands; E-mail: a.i.m.tummers-heemels@tue.nl.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on nearly every aspect of daily life, and social touch is no exception. For seniors, who are already at a higher risk of social isolation and loneliness, the pandemic created even greater barriers to physical touch and social connection. With social distancing measures in place, many seniors were unable to give and receive the social touch that they needed to maintain their physical and emotional well-being [6,26]. The effects of the pandemic on social touch amongst seniors are far-reaching and complex, and have especially impacted people with dementia living in intramural care settings. In this paper, we present the combined findings of a targeted literature review and an online survey study with the aim to explore the impact of the pandemic on social touch behaviors in senior care facilities. Through this exploration, we seek to uncover strategies and means – technological or otherwise – for promoting safe and meaningful social touch practices in senior care settings, and maintaining high levels of quality of life.

2. Methods

Design. We performed a short, targeted literature review focusing on the role and importance of social touch for elderly individuals. In particular, we focused on recent literature that presents or summarizes insights gained during the pandemic. To do this, we used a combination of the search terms “dementia”, “touch”, “COVID-19”, “and wellbeing”, using Google Scholar as search engine. In addition, we performed an online survey during the spring of 2021, at the height of the pandemic, probing a representative sample of care professionals on a broad range of issues, including social contact and touch, wellbeing and the impact of social distancing measures. Below, we will provide further details of the online survey. The data of this online survey were also used to investigate the impact of physical care home design on person with dementia, see [24].

Participants. From a total of 1069 Dutch dementia care facilities listed on a Dutch website of dementia care facilities in the Netherlands, we randomly selected and approached 100 care facilities, which included 60 regular and 40 private dementia care facilities. These randomly selected facilities were each contacted by phone, after which the head nurse of each care facility was invited to participate in the online survey through email. The online survey was completed by a total of 46 dementia care professionals.

Setting & Materials. The online survey was administered through LimeSurvey with open and closed questions structured in several categories, including questions on social contact and touch, residents’ well-being during the COVID pandemic, visits from family and friends, experiences of the care professional, the governmental restrictions regarding visits, touch and social distancing [24]. The online survey was approved by the ethical board of the HTI group at TU/e. Informed consent was provided by care professionals.

Data analysis. Thematic analyses were used for analyzing the open questions of the online survey, using a combination of Boeije’s approach [2] and Braun and Clarke’s approach [3]. The thematic analyses focused on touch and wellbeing were carried out by two researchers independently; insights were compared and differences resolved.

3. Results

3.1 Literature review

At the moment, one of the biggest threats to our society is found in the growing existence of loneliness, especially amongst senior citizens, while the human need for social proximity, attachment and belonging is crucial for survival. Threats to this need

can be harmful to our feelings of wellbeing and safety, and may even cause physical pain [24,27]. In general, interpersonal affectionate touch (or social touch) plays an important role in promoting relatedness and feelings of happiness in communicating emotions and intensifying interpersonal communication between friends, couples and family members. Social touch promotes physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing [9,20]. In nursing and care, massage and therapeutic touch are known to have beneficial effects and can increase feelings of well-being [1,5,14], as well as alleviate feelings of emptiness when other therapies are unsuccessful and words are not enough to bring comfort [23].

When we age, common hearing and vision loss have a significant impact on our ability to maintain social connections and feelings of belonging [22]. As we grow older and move into late adulthood our “tactile circumstances” change; this is already a significant issue for healthy seniors, but increases in importance for seniors who live with memory disorders, personality changes, and impaired reasoning skills as a consequence of dementia. Despite a general decline of perceptual and cognitive abilities, the perception of light touch is comparatively preserved during normal aging. Subjective pleasantness ratings of slowly stroking touch even increases with age [15,17,19].

As a consequence of the social distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, not being able to hug or touch had a huge impact on the quality of life of humans, especially the elderly and those who live with dementia. As Sachs [18] describes, people are able to adapt relatively well to a life without vision or hearing, but “an existence devoid of tactile sensation is another matter; sustained physical contact with other humans is a prerequisite for healthy relationships and successful engagement with the rest of one’s environment”. During COVID-19 we saw that a forced abstinence of social touch can lead to anxiety symptoms as a result of loneliness, causing a condition known as touch starvation or touch hunger [20]. For people with dementia the forced isolation and resulting loneliness could lead to a deterioration of the disease with increased negative psychological symptoms, due to reduced access to care and services and lack of mental and physical stimulation [13,23]. Also family caregivers of people with dementia who shared the same household experienced such challenges while taking care of a loved-one [12]. High rates of depression and anxiety in people with dementia were reported in care homes [7].

In most care homes we saw the daily struggle of trying to provide physical and mental care for the person with dementia while at the same time trying to follow the social distance restrictions. Despite these safety instructions and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in rigid protocols, death tolls in care homes were sky high. Constantly reminding the person with dementia of the situation with restrictions – which they found hard to understand -, it became clear that you cannot live with and care for a person with dementia without touch [6,23].

Research by De Luca and colleagues [4,5] showed that interpersonal touch – not merely task-related instrumental touch (e.g., washing), but a more intentional, caring and comforting touch – can be of mutual benefit; a positive intervention for both the patient and the caregiver. Even more, the severe social distancing restrictions during the pandemic have led to an increased awareness amongst nursing staff of the importance of the use of touch in healthcare setting, including offering handholding and physical consolation to a person passing away without family allowed to be present. Despite all the restrictions, staff, family and informal caregivers demonstrated great resilience in trying to keep in contact by using technologies like video calling or offering therapeutic touch to socially isolated people using for example robotic animal companions [25]. In future lockdowns, care homes need to implement procedures and regulations to allow, even under strict circumstances, relatives to visit their loved ones at all times [6,13].

3.2 Online Survey

The thematic analysis of the responses of the dementia care professionals to the online survey in long-term care facilities yielded three main themes, regarding social touch and its specific entanglements in dementia care, the difficulties in navigating the tradeoffs between personal safety and psychosocial wellbeing in care settings, and the need to compensate for the restrictions imposed as a consequence of COVID-19.

Awareness of the Importance of Social Touch and Closeness to Loved Ones.

Having to be socially isolated to prevent infection with the COVID-19 virus, nursing staff, family, and residents have all realized, more than before, that social contact is necessary and that people should not be restricted from it. As nursing staff were advised against giving hugs or holding hands with residents, many of the residents were deprived of social touch and were reported to experience touch hunger. Respondents shared that social touch is a basic need especially in times of distress: *“Residents are touch starved. They miss receiving a hug”*. *“A person with dementia should not be forced into a social distancing situation, they often live in a constant need of bodily contact”*.

It was not only burdensome for the person with dementia to cope with the no-touch situation, also the relatives missed the loving bodily contact. *“Although the family understood the difficult situation, they sometimes suffered more from the no-visit policy than the residents themselves”*. Residents experienced feelings of loneliness, boredom, under-stimulation, alienation, and incomprehension in missing their loved ones and familiar, daily activities. Some experienced further deterioration of their dementia due to the changes that had been made for the sake of infection prevention; especially those with more advanced stages of dementia who no longer recognized their relatives. *“In dealing with a person with dementia non-verbal communication -to be able to see and to touch each other - is extremely important for bonding and trust”*.

The nursing staff too became more aware of the significance of social touch during their work: *“I never thought I was so physically set, but not until now I realize myself how many touch opportunities are gone now I have to keep distance.”* *“To be able to approach and touch the resident is so important in my work”*. It was especially harrowing to see older people pass away in isolation, not being able to touch or be touched by loved-ones; to bring comfort and consolation during their moments of need *“What hit me real hard was the process of the lonely passing away of the residents”*.

Clashing Values in Caregiving: Safe Care versus Warm Care.

“You had to act against your gut instincts to fend off the residents who wanted to hug you.” Inherent to many of the experiences that were reported was a fundamental tension between on the one hand wanting to keep residents safe and prevent infections with COVID-19, while on the other hand providing warm care, to show affection, and give warmth through social and physical touch, especially when relatives could not. *“For some residents a chat is not enough or not possible. They clearly have a need for physical touch in the form of holding hands, cuddling. This was discouraged as much as possible, so it felt like you were not doing right by the resident”*.

The nurses had to work constantly in an atmosphere of being alert not to infect the residents, colleagues or their own loved ones at home. *“Social distancing was not always possible, our residents need a lot of physical care, you have to stand close. We tried to touch and hug less, but when the residents asked for it we couldn’t resist to hold hands or offer a hug”*.

Compensating for the Restrictive Measures and their Consequences.

Nursing staff have tried hard to accommodate the absence of visits and arrange alternative contact moments. Respondents reportedly engaged in more social contact, giving extra individual attention. *“It was a tough period of time, but overall there was much understanding. Video calling, contact through the window, contact in a tent with a microphone, contact across a hedge in the garden. We have tried many things to still allow some contact. However, real, physical contact, a quick hug or a social touch, which is very important, was very much missed.”* Many residents did not understand the alternative visit and became more agitated and frustrated by the lack of intimacy and touch. Other residents, however, did enjoy the alternative means of social contact. *“We tried everything to establish warm contact, but real physical contact, like a hug, the inability to touch, was a great loss”*. The care professionals emphasize the need to learn from this situation, in order to be prepared for potential future lockdowns and to prevent the negative consequences of forced isolation and touch restrictions. *“After the lockdown our team is thinking of alternative ways to provide care; to use more domotics (like video-calling) or to buy a robotic cat to address touch needs”*.

4. Discussion.

People with dementia, individuals that emerge and exist through connection, are lost as a human without touch [6]. Indeed, the absence of social interactions has deeply affected this vulnerable group, whose opportunities to express these needs and take action to meet their unmet needs are limited. Both our literature review and survey highlight the fact that social relationships and physical contact are key to personal wellbeing and underline the importance of the entangled role of touch in dementia care [6,7,23]. To an extent, the tradeoff between safety and physical health versus psychosocial wellbeing is artifactual; both are key to an individual’s health.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made us all acutely aware of the significance and meaning of social touch in our lives. Many efforts have been made to mitigate the negative effects of social isolation [8], including physical hug-screens, soft hugable or strokeable objects, and improvised handholding in the form of heated gloves. We also observed an increased use of digital touch technologies, including robotic pets, and various telepresence and virtual social touch devices.

Experiences over the last two years have been valuable in demonstrating what works, but also where it leaves us wanting. Social touch mediated through technology, though potentially meaningful [11], is still in its infancy. For many people and contexts, it remains a poor proxy of interpersonal touch, demonstrating that social touch is so much more than the mere innervation of touch receptors in the skin. To date, there are no satisfactory replacements for the closeness and warm physical interactions of a loved one.

Looking ahead, specific training on interpersonal touch in nursing education can change the perception of the richness and power of the use of compassionate touch in dementia care [5, 10]. Social restrictions in the future need to be reviewed and revised to allow and facilitate physical contact and touch for people living with dementia. They should be able to express and experience physical as well as social touch and closeness to loved ones at all times. We all have realized that, more than ever before, social contact is necessary and that people with dementia should not be restricted from it, jamais.

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