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Tackling the Mountain of Wants, Needs, and Consent

(From Chapter Three of *The Touch Crisis: Navigating the Tricky Terrain of Bringing Healthy Touch Back To Our Culture* by Dawn Bennett)

In chapter one, I invited you to look at touch roots, emotions, and boundaries in a few different categories. If you took the time to answer those, hopefully your deeper knowledge about yourself has been informing and waking up your own wants, needs, and boundaries. In chapter two, I asked you to start waking up your touch awareness using inanimate objects and animals and feeling into a sense of safety for yourself and them. In this chapter, we are exploring your own pleasure and your wants and needs.

Exercise 1: Inanimate Objects

Go back to the second exercise in chapter two with the inanimate object. But this time, beyond just sensing the physical attributes, see if you can find pleasure in your hands by touching it. In other words, instead of using your hands to feel it, use IT to touch YOU—your hand, fingertips, the back of your hands, perhaps your wrists or your legs. How does it feel? Can you find a way to receive enjoyment from the object? Try smiling and breathing. Stay playful and open. The more relaxed you are and the slower and lighter you move the object against your skin, the easier this exercise will be. The goal is to open yourself to finding enjoyment through your sensory nerves. Wake up your hands to the possibility of *enjoying* the input of touch, rather than just processing it. You can practice this exercise anytime, anywhere, to condition your hands to become more sensitive and to train yourself to experience pleasure from the smallest amount of intentional, safe touch.

You may repeat this exercise using your own skin-to skin contact. Be really intentional with the way you contact yourself and do it with respect, care, and curiosity. What is it like to use your hand to feel your face? Your arm? Play with increasing your awareness on both the “giving” and “receiving” side.

Exercise 2: Animals

Go back to the third exercise in chapter two with the animal. Find the same or another animal and repeat the process. But this time, include an additional focus. Remember the exercise you did with the inanimate object? Explore in a similar intention with this animal. Next, bring an



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intention of touching it for your own pleasure and really experiencing in your own hands the texture of fur, feathers, nose, tail, feet, or wherever you merge in touch. What is it like to touch to *give* it pleasure, and what is it like to touch to *receive* pleasure? What do you want and need, and what can you sense that the animal wants or needs? How can you honor that? How does the animal give consent or take it away?

Exercise 3: Strategy

I would like to invite you to start playing with the idea of increasing the amount, quality, or type of touch with three people you are close to in a way that is consensual for both of you. Tune into your wants and needs, and find a way to ask that sounds genuine to you while holding the integrity of your own boundaries. Think about ways in which you can make requests you are sure will be granted if this idea scares you.

Amount = Number of touches per day/week. Can you give this person one extra touch, hug, high-five, etc.?

Quality = This refers to setting a strong intention to communicate positive emotion through your touch with them. Instead of giving your friend a quick hello hug, can you really try to infuse all of your love and respect for him/her into your touch?

Type = If you usually give a handshake, but have wanted to hug this person, will you ask for one? How about shifting from a handshake to a handshake with a touch on the arm? How about from no touch to a high-five?

Stage 1:

1. Name three people you feel safe enough to touch or to start touching in a different way.
2. Write down how you would like to change the touch with them.
3. Write down a few notes about what you might say (more on this in the next chapter) to this person as you share your wants and needs.
4. Look at ways that you might subconsciously create a block to that happening (avoiding, body language, unaddressed emotions, allowing old habits, etc.).
5. Leave a column or space to fill out at the end of chapter four.

Your example could look something like this:



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Name	Touch Change	Communication	Potential block/s	
My roommate Jess	Add one hug a day	Tell her I'm playing with adding more touch into my life and ask if she would like a hug when she gets home from work. (We gave each other hugs all the time before we lived together.)	Being too busy when she comes home or overwhelming her when she does get home	
The massage therapist at work	Add a hug when we see each other	Tell her that I always want to hug her when I see her because I think she's so amazing, but I didn't know how to ask before. Is that something she would like, or would she prefer to keep it as it is?	Telling myself she's too busy. Fear of rejection. Making sure I'm not in the same space as her on Thursday.	
Dad	More intentional hugs	I will hug him with more intention.	Falling into old habit and not being present when hugging. Allowing a hug before I've set everything down when I walk in the door instead of asking him to wait a second.	

Note that when I am asking for increase of touch, I am asking if it is something *they also want*. I am not just asking if they will do it for me. This clarity in asking can help keep the give/receive balance more equal. If we both want it, there is equality. If they are doing it *for* me, then perhaps we should negotiate something different. You can also communicate to your people that just because you are both trying something new, you would appreciate feedback if their desire changes at any time—to increase or to back off with touch. This way, you can play with different consent experiences.



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Before starting these conversations, I recommend you read chapter four for additional tools and ideas.

Stage 2:

Play with the concept of approaching the conversation of touch in each of the following cultures in a way that feels comfortable to you. Just because you write it here doesn't mean you actually have to take action on it tomorrow; but use this exercise as a way to honor and validate your own needs, as well as to begin to find words that can help you move gently towards the type of touch you want in all areas of your life. The conversations don't have to be asking for touch, but can be establishing a base boundary of touch in the future. As a reminder, the cultures/communities I had you evaluate were:

Public, work, friend/partnership, children, family of origin.

Please make your own categories that fit you. Public may turn into a few different categories of spiritual community, volunteer organization events, or acquaintances at the pub. Friend and partnership may get split into two. Children may need to split, as teenage boys will require different communication than your twenty-five-year-old daughter or your six-year-old son.

Take note. Are you feeling resistance around going through with this? Take a few deep breaths. Use the self-awareness in this phase of your own healing work, and play with overcoming the resistance. Add those to any potential body language, time, or habitual blocks that may come up as well, for your own awareness. I added a few examples below. I also added a column for you to play with the idea of when might be a good time to approach them after reading chapter four. Just like my example with my former husband, think of a situation that would be fitting for both of you.

Public	Touch	Ask	Potential block/s	
My son's best friend's mom	Celebratory high-fives	We are always watching the boys play football together, and when they make a big play, I want to give someone a high-five. I feel close enough to you to ask what your touch boundaries are and if that is something you are	I don't feel like she accepts me.	



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		comfortable with. What would you like?		
Amy, the head of the annual fundraiser	Hug	I honor all the work you are doing for this fundraiser, and sometimes it looks like you are overwhelmed and just need a hug. I don't know your boundaries, but want you to know that if you need a pat on the shoulder or a hug to help you ground, just ask. I'm really open to touch.	She might see me as unprofessional or take it wrong. I might find tasks to do to avoid talking to her about it.	

Work People	Touch	Ask	Potential block/s	
Cindy the receptionist	Touching her arm	I often touch my friend's arm when I am talking to emphasize a point or to feel connected. I talk with you often on our way out of the building at night, and want to respect your boundaries and our working environment. Is that something that feels comfortable for you?	I've had closed body language with her and might do it again.	
Kathy, partner in the merger project	Hug	Every time we make a big success, I get so excited I want to hug you, but I have no idea what your touch	I haven't expressed anything before with her, so this	



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		boundaries are, especially since we work together. What is your view on touch at work?	might be too big of a step.	
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Family	Touch	Ask	Potential block/s	
My husband	Hug before bedtime	We have gotten into the habit of just saying good night and wandering off to bed whenever we are tired. Can we start making an effort to give a good hug before bed?	Kids get in the way. I have to get stuff ready for work the next day. I might get too involved in the tv program. He might laugh at me.	
My fourteen-year-old daughter	Hug	I want to respect your touch boundaries and your need or lack of desire for touch. I realized I would like more touch from you. Are you open to trying to add one hug in a day? I'll let you lead and do it when it feels right for you.	She'll be on her phone and I won't want to interrupt her. I'll be on my phone.	
My sixteen-year-old son	High-five	I know you are at an age where you may not want to give me hugs right now, but I really appreciate the validation I feel when you make an effort to connect. Would you consider giving me a hug or at least a high-five to say hello when you	I am afraid I won't say the right words.	



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		come through the door? I'll let you lead so you don't feel embarrassed if your friends are around.		
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Tune in. How did it feel to write this list? How are you feeling in your body? Congratulate yourself!

I applaud you for taking the first steps to really honor what you want and need, as well as bring your awareness and focus to a plan. It can be hard to ask for what you want, so remember to celebrate every success of your journey, no matter how small it seems.