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# Touch me or Touch me not: Benefits of affective touch on emotion regulation in adults

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## Abstract

AT (i.e., a slow and pleasant touch, likely mediated by CT fibres) has a special role in promoting bonding and emotional regulation during early development. Moreover, recent studies in adults suggested that AT promotes establishing and maintaining social connections and mitigating the effects of social conflict and ostracism. Here, we explored whether the AT effectively provides positive outcomes in mitigating adults' experience of negative emotions as reflected in participants' behavioural and physiological responses to emotionally arousing stimuli. Adult women were stimulated on their forearms through AT or neutral touch (i.e., Tapping) while they viewed a series of emotionally arousing (e.g., dead bodies) and neutral images (e.g., bicycles). We measured their skin conductance response and their explicit rating of the images' unpleasantness while also exploratory assessing the observed impact on individual traits such as empathy, high sensitivity and sensitivity to AT itself. Our findings showed that AT reduced the arousal and the negative perception of highly emotional stimuli but not the neutral ones, revealing the soothing role of AT in emotional contexts. Further, preliminary findings on individual traits revealed that, while empathy did not predict changes in emotional processing irrespective of tactile stimulation, individuals with higher traits of sensitivity reported AT as less pleasant. In turn, AT leads highly sensitive individuals to report the emotional images as more disturbing when associated with AT than seen alone. Our findings will be discussed in light of the possible factors mediating the observed interindividual variability in affective touch perception.

**Keywords:** Affective touch, emotion regulation, skin conductance, arousal, individual differences

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