
A Touch of Compassion: a qualitative study with support workers in services used by learning-disabled adults

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Abstract

Background: Many learning-disabled people do not communicate verbally. Support Workers (supporters) use touch in their care role. To date, there is little research exploring how supporters intentionally use everyday touch as a means of communicating and connecting with people who do not express verbally. This study sought to understand the kinds of touch used in daily care; supporters' awareness of the potential to communicate and connect through touch and whether they considered this a medium to demonstrate compassion.

Method: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted (recorded and transcribed) with 16 volunteer supporters from residential and day-care services. Data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results: Themes generated:

- uses of touch
- communication through touch
- relationship building through touch
- organisational support

Touch is complex and multidimensional. The relationship between care receivers and supporters exists in the context of the "constant" touch required. Touch is essential in intimate care. Interviews afforded supporters a unique opportunity to reflect upon their touch, realising their potential to communicate through touch with "intellectual kindness", thus impacting positively on the care relationship. None of the care organisations involved held explicit policies or specific training on touch. Supporters received little support in their use of touch and its complex communicative function.

Conclusion: Further research is required to fully understand the significance of touch, particularly interactive touch, in the lives of learning-disabled people when communication is otherwise difficult. National guidance and training will enable supporters and care receivers to confidently use touch as a reciprocal communicating medium and sense of connection.

Keywords: Touch, interactive touch, communication, non, verbal communication, compassion, learning disability, care, support workers, carers

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