

THE SECRETS OF CUDDLING REVEALED

Is a cuddle better than sex? Don't panic if the passion is gone. New research says it's hugs not hanky-panky that keeps couples together.

According to new research, the frequency of cuddling is a far better indicator of the strength of a relationship than how often you're swinging from the chandeliers [says the Daily Mail](#). 'Cuddling provides not just sensual pleasure, but also a feeling of comfort, security and companionship, all of which are just as important to a relationship as sex,' explains Paula Hall, relationship expert for online dating service Parship. In fact, maintaining an intimate connection without the wild abandon of the hormonal early days can be vital for a happy relationship.



'The advantage of non-sexual intimacy is that couples often use this time together to talk about their emotional lives,' says Paula. 'Whereas when sex is their only way of getting close, couples who find emotional openness difficult often rely on making love to help them connect. They can find themselves missing out on other levels of intimacy.'

If sex is the focus, it can mean that emotional problems are never discussed — whereas non-sexual touching, such as cuddling and stroking, encourages more relaxed bonding and intimate conversation, due in large part to the crucial 'cuddle hormone' oxytocin.

'Oxytocin is produced by touch and, as well as making us feel good, it also inspires us to touch more,' says Paula. 'That means that the more you touch, the closer you feel and the more you want to touch.' Once assumed to be related only to childbirth, because of the role it plays in both encouraging contractions and then chemically bonding mother and newborn, recent research suggests that oxytocin's ability to promote feelings of calm, love and connection also extends to couples in monogamous relationships. The feeling of 'melding' that happens when you gaze into a loved one's eyes, and the after-effects of calm and well-being that follow even non-sexual physical intimacy, could all be down to this miraculous hormone.

'Couples who find emotional openness difficult often rely on making love to help them connect, missing out on other levels of intimacy' 'We used to think that oxytocin was found only in the pregnant uterus, but in fact it's found in many sites in the body,' says clinical psychiatrist and author Dr Brenda Davies. 'It's been called "the love hormone" and its levels in our blood certainly increase when we hug, when we feel loving and even when we stroke a beloved pet. So it has a huge role to play in intimacy — and not just of the sexual kind.'

This wonder-hormone may even help you to broach difficult subjects. New research suggests that oxytocin can prevent the body's 'freeze' response to threat, and reduce 'fight-or-flight' panic. So if you have a tricky discussion about money or the kids coming up, a big cuddle before you begin talking is the perfect way to approach a difficult subject. Oxytocin has also been shown to decrease blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol, which has been linked to weight gain and a depressed immune system. 'It even plays a part in raising our self-esteem and, therefore, improves our capacity to have healthy, close relationships,' says Dr Davies. 'It's also a powerful natural anti-inflammatory, and has anti-ageing properties — one reason why people living isolated lives, with little human

touch, can age prematurely.'

One study suggests that after the intense sexual passion of the first few months, partners become 'imprinted' on each other. Once bonded, just the sight of your partner triggers a surge of oxytocin and a need for physical closeness that can be satisfied simply by cuddling.

This is good news for couples who still love each other but can't summon the energy for seduction on a nightly basis. While men and women produce equal amounts of oxytocin, its effects are intensified by oestrogen, meaning women tend to have functionally higher concentrations of the hormone. A Cambridge University study found that men who were given higher doses of oxytocin displayed greater levels of empathy with other's emotions.

Of course, it's often assumed that women are happy with a platonic cuddle, while men are always eager to get down to business. But another recent study from the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction suggests a different story. According to its research, among middle-aged couples in committed relationships, tenderness is often more important to the man than the woman; regular kisses and cuddling lead to greater relationship satisfaction in men than in their partners.

Paula Hall says: 'Inevitably, there are times when sex isn't an option due to illness or stress. By keeping in touch with hugging, a couple can continue to express their love and affection for each other.'