

Confessions of a Non-Hugger

I think I'm a fairly urbane person. I know how to properly address both the Prime Minister and the Queen (this hasn't come up yet, but I'm prepared, in case they show up on my doorstep one dark and stormy night), I know my salad fork from my dinner fork, I am polite and fairly formal when meeting strangers, and I drink my tea with my pinkie in the approved outward position.

What I don't know is how or when to hug.

Oh, I understand the physical action involved, and I certainly don't dislike or disapprove of social hugging, but I'm not always sure when it's appropriate to initiate a hug or what to do if someone hugs me.

To explain, I grew up in a small town in Eastern Ontario, surrounded by WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). WASPs don't hug that often. It's not that we never do, or that we don't like it, but we are not a physically demonstrative people (or at least my own family wasn't). Left to our own devices, it simply would not occur to us to do such a thing (except under very special, specific circumstances). As a general rule, most of us wouldn't hug a total stranger upon meeting them any more than we would yodel at them.

Some people around us *did* hug, and my usual strategy at such times was to briefly hug them back and escape from the embrace as quickly as possible. I was never sure if this was quite right or not, but it seemed to work back home, or at least I never offended anyone that I knew of. As I grew to adulthood I never actually learned the rules of hugging (if there are such things), but it didn't much matter where I grew up because most other people didn't hug either.

However, hugging became an issue when I moved to Toronto. I discovered that people of certain other cultures hug a *lot*, and this has led to social awkwardness on my part and sometimes misunderstandings or hurt feelings. Frankly I'm clueless about this stuff, and because I don't fully understand the logistics involved, I rarely initiate hugging. This has led people to believe that I don't like to hug, or worse, that I don't like the person anticipating my hug!

The fact is I don't understand the etiquette and I'm afraid of making a faux pas, and so I stand there looking gormless, waiting to see what the other person will do before I make a move. I find the whole thing to be extremely embarrassing.

Should I be the one initiating the embrace? If so, what is the correct timing? In other words, at what point will I have waited too long to hug them, and thus missed my window of opportunity? Is there a way to make up for such a gaffe?

What about all the different forms of hugging? For example, when is the simple hands on the shoulders air-kiss thing more appropriate than a big ol' bear hug? I don't want to appear

superficial, nor do I want to injure anyone, but I'm never sure just how enthusiastic to be (I do know there are hugs between these two extremes).

How should I react when someone unexpectedly hugs me? I know perfectly well that when this happens I look like they've just handed me a live flamingo, but it's because I don't know what I'm supposed to do now that I've been hugged.

For example, say a total stranger hugs me at a wedding - should I hug them back, and if so, for how long? At what point does the embrace become uncomfortable for the other person? I'm already uncomfortable because I don't know exactly what is appropriate - I don't want to be too perfunctory, nor so I want them to think I might go home with them if asked.

See how a simple hug can set off a panic attack in someone like me?

What if I really, really, don't want to be hugged for some reason (for example, the hugger is dirty or sweaty, or I know from experience that they're going to hurt me)? Is there a polite way to decline, and if so, what is it?

Even more mysterious is the combined hug and kiss on the cheek thing. Am I obligated to kiss them back? Does it have to equal the amount of times they've kissed me, or should I exceed it to prove how much I really like them? When they're leaving, is it my turn to initiate the hug-kiss combo? Will they be offended if I don't live up to their expectations? What exactly are their expectations anyway?

I know some people are probably laughing, but these are serious questions - but I'm not the only person asking them. A completely unscientific survey of my friends showed that many of them are as frightened about the whole hugging thing as I am, so I suspect the affliction is more wide-spread than anyone truly knows. Add to that the shame involved in not knowing how and when to do this simple thing, and we're potentially talking about a lot of closeted non-huggers.

If someone who truly understands the rules and etiquette of hugging were to write a guide book for people like me they would make a fortune. They could call it something like "How to Hug - a Guide for the Clueless" and non-huggers from all over would secretly purchase it to get a handle on what we're supposed to do. My only suggestion is this - make it an e-book that we can download, because we are not going to want bookstore clerks laughing at us behind our backs for buying a how-to guide to learn how to hug people.

Well, now you know. It's a very embarrassing affliction, and not one most of us like to talk about because from our perspective, most of the world seems to pick up this knowledge at a very young age. How can I explain it? Some people (including me) are deficient in our social education. I think we deserve your pity, rather than scorn.

Make the world a better place! Teach an awkward non-hugger the finer points and rules of hugging today!