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More public display of affection required

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*Modi with Obama.*

Last year, Modi hogged the headlines with his hugs of global leaders. Is it time to bring some of the bilateral bromancing home?

Whatever your impression of Narendra Modi before he became prime minister, it probably wasn't cuddle-bunny-in-chief. But over the last year, Modi's meetings with global leaders have revealed a new side to him. Watch him greeting Barack Obama in New Delhi, breaking protocol for a bearhug and lingering hand-clasp. And that's not the only one - he has embraced Japan's Shinzo Abe and Australia's Tony Abbott with equal enthusiasm. His meeting with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi also featured a close hug, but with some noticeable tension in it. Most recently, during his surprise visit to Lahore, Modi and Nawaz Sharif exchanged a warm and unstinting hug. He playfully tweaks the ears of small children, he does drum solos. Over the months, the PM's body language has been entirely

different from the stiff formality of his predecessors and peers.

One thing is obvious - when Modi is relaxed and happy, he doesn't shy away from PDA (public display of affection). Maybe he has a surfeit of oxytocin after all - the cuddle chemical that drives social attachment, cooperation, romantic and maternal bonding, and trust. Oxytocin, secreted by the posterior lobe of the pituitary gland, is released with loving contact. It reduces anxiety and spreads a sense of contentment.

For a man who lacks a family or pets, this nurturing instinct needs to find some expression. And while his bonhomie with world leaders is bound to advance India's diplomatic interests, wouldn't it be great if he could direct it towards his colleagues in

India? Many in the opposition distrust him, see him as cold and forbidding - perhaps he could learn to extend his warmth and friendliness to opposition leaders, or even party colleagues. There are instances where he has hugged Rajnath Singh, Baba Ramdev, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. But in this polarised, distrustful political environment, everyone could use a surge of oxytocin.

Or wait, hold on a second. While oxytocin has a popular reputation of being a bonding agent, new research shows that it also makes people prefer their own groups over other groups. Psychologists at the University of Amsterdam found that oxytocin-influenced Dutch men were likely to sacrifice Germans or Arabs rather than other Dutch men, that this "hug chemical" can, in fact, fuel ethnocentrism and prejudice.

But a new year should prompt new beginnings, and the hope that goodwill and affection can win over petty divisions. One hopes that Modi and other political leaders find a way to harness their happiest hormones, this new year.

Want to increase your cuddle quotient?

Studies show that cuddling other humans, pets or even a teddy bear releases the "cuddle chemical" oxytocin. This chemical increases one's feeling of wellbeing, self-confidence, improves social skills and reduces stress. "It creates mutual trust and helps you bond better," says Dr Shantanu Nagarkatti, a Mumbai-based surgeon with a keen interest in mind-body medicine. Nagarkatti adds that the social benefits of this hormone are so strong that people are buying oxytocin nasal sprays for use before an important business meeting, or a date. Effects of oxytocin can even positively impact the economy, according to research by well-known neuro-economist Paul Zak. Zak's studies show that individuals pumped with oxytocin are 80% more likely to be generous towards a stranger. And for every 15% of the population that begins to trust its business peers, there is a 1% rise in the per capita output growth every year.