

What Will Greetings Look Like in a Post-Coronavirus World?

 [nytimes.com/2020/06/10/smarter-living/coronavirus-greetings-handshakes-hugs.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/smarter-living/coronavirus-greetings-handshakes-hugs.html)

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It might be a while before we can offer a hug or handshake.

But that's OK.

By Allie Volpe

Video



CreditCredit...By Pablo Rochat

Kelly Sutton is reckoning with a world without hugs. Mrs. Sutton, 43, a television host and country music journalist in Nashville, has struggled with social distancing, considering her greeting of choice involves throwing her arms around her conversation partner.

“There is something about that feeling, you know, when someone hugs you, you get that warm fuzzy inside,” she said. “It’s that physical I see you, I love you, I love your spirit. It gives you so much more energy. It’s almost like an energy exchange.”

Isolated with her husband and daughter in their home in Franklin, Tenn., Mrs. Sutton has relied on her family to fulfill her hug quota. “My poor dog is like, Let go, let go!”

As we now know, the coronavirus is spread through close contact, so health officials have urged people to maintain a distance of at least six feet from one another, and cultures around the world have put a moratorium on physical gestures like hugs and cheek kisses.

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the country's leading infectious disease expert, has called for the end of handshakes, as hands can pick up germs from surfaces.

Dr. Mark S. Sklansky, chief of pediatric cardiology at Mattel Children's Hospital at the University of California, Los Angeles, has long considered handshakes a "terrible idea from an infectious standpoint," and, in 2014, championed handshake-free zones in health care facilities.

Likewise, Tiffany Field, director of Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami, said physical gestures were unlikely to resume anytime soon. "I don't think we're going to have hugs and handshakes for a long time," she said.

With such nonverbal greetings so ingrained in our cultures, however, we must now consciously evaluate our behaviors and create new habits for the sake of public health.

Physical greeting habits are hard to break.

All over the world, physical and nonverbal gestures are used in greetings and departures, such as cheek kisses in Europe and Latin America and bows in Japan and India.

"A greeting is an action, and action has a message," said Andy Molinsky, a professor at the International Business School at Brandeis who wrote the book "Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Across Cultures Without Losing Yourself in the Process." "When you hug someone and give them a tight squeeze, you might be saying 'I miss you.'"

Interpreting these gestures is an emotional shorthand that has allowed humans to convey a lot while saying little. The handshake, for instance, can be used as an introduction, a show of sportsmanship and a peace offering, and its earliest known depictions are in artwork dated to the ninth century B.C.

In those early days, handshakes signaled that the parties involved were unarmed, said Patti Wood, a body language and human behavior expert who wrote the book "Snap: Making the Most of First Impressions, Body Language and Charisma."

"Safety is one of the first and major reasons we greet people," she said.

In more modern applications, a physical greeting can be a marker of social status, Ms. Wood said. Who offers the handshake first and the strength of the grip are subtle power plays.

"In Asian cultures," Ms. Wood said, "you bow deeper the more powerful the person you're bowing to is."

In many cultures, physical greetings are more indicative of the depth of a relationship than status or power. A full-bodied hug from a family member, a kiss on the cheek from a friend, a fist-bump from a gym buddy — these are ways of building warmth and intimacy with our social connections.

Because handshakes and hugs are regular parts of our physical repertoire, these habits are difficult to break, said Paul Zak, who studies the neuroscience of behavioral economics at Claremont Graduate University in California. Fear, however, is a powerful motivator, he said, and a desire for safety may trump one's dedication to the handshake.

A changing environment can cause those habits to “change rapidly,” he said, as we are seeing during the current pandemic.

What will physical greetings look like after the pandemic?

While some people may be eager to resume their usual behaviors after social-distancing measures have been relaxed, in the absence of a coronavirus vaccine, many will be more cautious with their interpersonal interactions, Dr. Molinsky said. Instead of reverting to familiar physical greetings, he said, society will adopt new ones with similar meanings. Instead of interpreting a neighbor's beeline to the other side of the street with a quick nod as cold and distant, we may perceive it as a safe acknowledgment.

“I suspect that there'll be some sort of semi-universal slack-cutting that goes on in terms of if someone engages in a gesture you're not used to or doesn't follow the social script,” he said. “People will have this psychological pause button where they're saying: ‘Oh, wait a second. We're in this time. They're probably protecting themselves from contagion.’”

While just a few months ago it might have been rude to rebuff a handshake in a business meeting, the rules around social niceties have changed, said Lizzie Post, the co-host of the “Awesome Etiquette Podcast.” Until a vaccine is widely available, the polite course of action is to take extra care to keep others' health in mind.

“We always say safety supersedes etiquette,” Ms. Post said. “There's a global pandemic that we're all trying to stay safe from. Therefore the actions that make us safe to one another, to a society, are going to be the proper, considerate and honest things to be doing right now.”

Dr. Zak predicted bows or head nods would gain favor as nontouch greetings. Ms. Wood anticipated that people would maintain more physical distance between one another before engaging in conversation.

Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated June 5, 2020

Does asymptomatic transmission of Covid-19 happen?

So far, the evidence seems to show it does. A widely cited paper published in April suggests that people are most infectious about two days before the onset of coronavirus symptoms and estimated that 44 percent of new infections were a result of transmission from people who were not yet showing symptoms. Recently, a top expert at the World Health Organization stated that transmission of the coronavirus by people who did not have symptoms was “very rare,” but she later walked back that statement.

How does blood type influence coronavirus?

A study by European scientists is the first to document a strong statistical link between genetic variations and Covid-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus. Having Type A blood was linked to a 50 percent increase in the likelihood that a patient would need to get oxygen or to go on a ventilator, according to the new study.

How many people have lost their jobs due to coronavirus in the U.S.?

The unemployment rate fell to 13.3 percent in May, the Labor Department said on June 5, an unexpected improvement in the nation’s job market as hiring rebounded faster than economists expected. Economists had forecast the unemployment rate to increase to as much as 20 percent, after it hit 14.7 percent in April, which was the highest since the government began keeping official statistics after World War II. But the unemployment rate dipped instead, with employers adding 2.5 million jobs, after more than 20 million jobs were lost in April.

Will protests set off a second viral wave of coronavirus?

Mass protests against police brutality that have brought thousands of people onto the streets in cities across America are raising the specter of new coronavirus outbreaks, prompting political leaders, physicians and public health experts to warn that the crowds could cause a surge in cases. While many political leaders affirmed the right of protesters to express themselves, they urged the demonstrators to wear face masks and maintain social distancing, both to protect themselves and to prevent further community spread of the virus. Some infectious disease experts were reassured by the fact that the protests were held outdoors, saying the open air settings could mitigate the risk of transmission.

How do we start exercising again without hurting ourselves after months of lockdown?

Exercise researchers and physicians have some blunt advice for those of us aiming to return to regular exercise now: Start slowly and then rev up your workouts, also slowly. American adults tended to be about 12 percent less active after the stay-at-home mandates began in March than they were in January. But there are steps you can take to ease your way back into regular exercise safely. First, “start at no more than 50 percent of the exercise you were doing before Covid,” says Dr. Monica Rho, the chief of musculoskeletal medicine at the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab in Chicago. Thread in some preparatory squats, too, she advises. “When you haven’t been exercising, you lose muscle mass.” Expect some muscle twinges after these preliminary, post-lockdown sessions, especially a day or two later. But sudden or increasing pain during exercise is a clarion call to stop and return home.

My state is reopening. Is it safe to go out?

States are reopening bit by bit. This means that more public spaces are available for use and more and more businesses are being allowed to open again. The federal government is largely leaving the decision up to states, and some state leaders are leaving the decision up to local authorities. Even if you aren’t being told to stay at home, it’s still a good idea to limit trips outside and your interaction with other people.

What’s the risk of catching coronavirus from a surface?

Touching contaminated objects and then infecting ourselves with the germs is not typically how the virus spreads. But it can happen. A number of studies of flu, rhinovirus, coronavirus and other microbes have shown that respiratory illnesses, including the new coronavirus, can spread by touching contaminated surfaces, particularly in places like day care centers, offices and hospitals. But a long chain of events has to happen for the disease to spread that way. The best way to protect yourself from coronavirus — whether it’s surface transmission or close human contact — is still social distancing, washing your hands, not touching your face and wearing masks.

What are the symptoms of coronavirus?

Common symptoms include fever, a dry cough, fatigue and difficulty breathing or shortness of breath. Some of these symptoms overlap with those of the flu, making detection difficult, but runny noses and stuffy sinuses are less common. The C.D.C. has also added chills, muscle pain, sore throat, headache and a new loss of the sense of taste or smell as symptoms to look out for. Most people fall ill five to seven days after exposure, but symptoms may appear in as few as two days or as many as 14 days.

How can I protect myself while flying?

If air travel is unavoidable, there are some steps you can take to protect yourself. Most important: Wash your hands often, and stop touching your face. If possible, choose a window seat. A study from Emory University found that during flu season, the safest place to sit on a plane is by a window, as people sitting in window seats had less contact with potentially sick people. Disinfect hard surfaces. When you get to your seat and your hands are clean, use disinfecting wipes to clean the hard surfaces at your seat like the head and arm rest, the seatbelt buckle, the remote, screen, seat back pocket and the tray table. If the seat is hard and nonporous or leather or pleather, you can wipe that down, too. (Using wipes on upholstered seats could lead to a wet seat and spreading of germs rather than killing them.)

How do I take my temperature?

Taking one's temperature to look for signs of fever is not as easy as it sounds, as "normal" temperature numbers can vary, but generally, keep an eye out for a temperature of 100.5 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. If you don't have a thermometer (they can be pricey these days), there are other ways to figure out if you have a fever, or are at risk of Covid-19 complications.

Should I wear a mask?

The C.D.C. has recommended that all Americans wear cloth masks if they go out in public. This is a shift in federal guidance reflecting new concerns that the coronavirus is being spread by infected people who have no symptoms. Until now, the C.D.C., like the W.H.O., has advised that ordinary people don't need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. Part of the reason was to preserve medical-grade masks for health care workers who desperately need them at a time when they are in continuously short supply. Masks don't replace hand washing and social distancing.

What should I do if I feel sick?

If you've been exposed to the coronavirus or think you have, and have a fever or symptoms like a cough or difficulty breathing, call a doctor. They should give you advice on whether you should be tested, how to get tested, and how to seek medical treatment without potentially infecting or exposing others.

How do I get tested?

If you're sick and you think you've been exposed to the new coronavirus, the C.D.C. recommends that you call your healthcare provider and explain your symptoms and fears. They will decide if you need to be tested. Keep in mind that there's a chance — because of a lack of testing kits or because you're asymptomatic, for instance — you won't be able to get tested.



Dr. Zak suggested outlining boundaries when it comes to group interactions.

“We can set the standard of, Hey, we're having this meeting, we shouldn't shake hands yet, we're not through the coronavirus epidemic,” he said. “We can just state that and decide that's the new normal.”

It's also possible that, for many people, the new normal won't feel so abnormal. After all, physical gestures already appeared to be declining before the pandemic, according to Dr. Field's research. Over the past 15 months, Dr. Field and her team analyzed the behaviors of people at airport gates around the world and found that they spent most of their preboarding time in airports engaged with their phones and not with other travelers.

“I think we were on our way to not touching so much in public with these airport gate studies we were doing,” she said. “I think people are so into their cellphones and into technology and social media that I don't think they're going to feel really touch-deprived. If they were, they would've felt it before this pandemic, and I don't think it was really happening.”

While it's true we may miss out on some of the many health benefits of daily human touch — decreases in heart rate, blood pressure and stress hormones and increases in bonding hormones like oxytocin — Dr. Field said that interpersonal contact wasn't the only way to get the feel-good benefits of touch. As long as the skin is being activated by exercise, stretching or even a prolonged scrub in the shower, you're stimulating the skin's pressure receptors, and activating therapeutic responses within the body that induce relaxation and reduce depression, anxiety and heart rate.

“When you move your skin, you’re slowing down the nervous system and the production of stress hormones,” Dr. Field said. “I think people who are home alone are going to have to do a lot of exercise, a lot of walking around the living room to stimulate, to move their skin. That’s what’s really critical for health.”

Close the gap by opening up.

To compensate for the loss of physical closeness in greetings, we may need to be more emotionally open, Ms. Wood said.

“When you shake hands, it’s equal to three hours of face-to-face interaction,” she said. “If you don’t shake hands, it takes about three hours to get to the same level of rapport if you did not shake hands.”

Even at a safe distance, we can inquire about our conversation partner’s family, hobbies and favorite television shows, establishing familiarity and building the relationship verbally instead of physically.

“It could be a verbal handshake: ‘I really appreciate you,’ ‘I really value you,’” Dr. Zak said. “We’ve got to replace that emotional component that was implicit now with something explicit. If that sticks, maybe that’s a beautiful thing.”

Until a coronavirus vaccine is developed, Mrs. Sutton, the Nashville journalist, said she would put her hugging on hiatus, maybe opting for a bow or fist bump in its absence. She’ll have to monitor her actions, she said, and curb her natural instinct to say hello with a loving squeeze. At least for now.

“Once this is tied up with a nice, neat little bow,” Mrs. Sutton said, “I think I will go back to hugging people.”