

A hugger not a shrugger be

After the All Blacks' fabulous win last weekend, I wasn't interested in the after-match interviews (cliché city). I was on hug watch.

You know - hugging, when two people embrace one another, arms enveloping, squeezing, with maybe something said in the ear of the recipient, who will be hugging back.

I wanted to see how real men do it these days, and you don't get realer than the ABs. It was revealing. They don't hug so much as clasp.

It's usually a rapid exchange of not-quite intimacy, a clap on the other's shoulder, so quick you need to watch closely for it to register. It may be extended a bit after someone scores a try, but after the match it's cursory.

All Blacks halfback TJ Perenara did hold on to the Australian rugby big nana by hand and upper bicep to honghi him, but I suspect that was to demonstrate cultural superiority. We all know how racially barren Australia is.

New Zealand's women ABs, the Black Ferns, hug longer and less self-consciously, which reinforces the old truism that New Zealand women hog hugging, while greeting men attempt to break each other's hands in some sort of mini-arm wrestle.

Our fathers told us to shake hands firmly and look the other fellow in the eye, lest someone in business thought they could get one over us. I've got big hands and a strong grip (I won't go into its development); scrawny youth that I was, nobody was going to under-estimate me - until I shook hands with Colin Meads once and realised the futility of self-deception.

But now I'm in trouble. I've developed a hug problem. Basically, I'm under-hugging, so I'm now on a hug regime to get my frequency up and increase the wellbeing I'm apparently able to dispense and receive by engaging in grizzly bear-like behaviour with fellow humans.

One in particular. Lin reckons my hug profile has got a bit ragged. Her feedback, issued without rancour or any deep sighing, came after we visited some friends the other day and the husband hugged her warmly and without prejudice.

When we got home, she said I didn't do that enough. More hugs, please. And she was right, when I thought about it.

Writers may in fact be some of the worst performers when it comes to hugging. We're constantly distracted. Well, I am. Thoughts of the current book/column/article dominate most waking moments, to the point where showing spontaneous affection may have become a neglected art form.

I'm now hugging more frequently and with greater passion, but of course the whole business sent me into Google-land to find out more about this curious form of behaviour.

It turns out there is good reason to embrace each other...it promotes wellbeing, especially good mental health.

According to an American counsellor called Wendell Williams, when you hug someone it releases oxytocin, also known as "the cuddle hormone". That makes you feel warm inside.

Psychologists say oxytocin promotes feelings of devotion, trust and bonding, which help us connect to other people.

"These connections become even more valuable as you age," says Williams. "The loneliness that comes with years can increase stress and affect overall health. Hugging has been proven to directly fight feelings of loneliness."

Oxytocin has also been shown to decrease the risk of heart disease. When you hug, receptors in your skin send signals to the vagus nerve, which has the power to slow down your heart and decrease blood pressure, calming you.

A study by Harvard Medical School discovered that children who are not hugged may have stunted growth and exhibit poor behaviour. Another published in something called *Psychological Science* found that touching and hugging can comfort people who suffer from low self-esteem.

It said a hug can provide "existential security" to someone who is drifting. Even embracing inanimate objects, like stuffed animals, can help alleviate fear (no mention of cats and dogs).

By the way, what's "existential security"? It refers to a theory that Western societies where basic survival can be taken for granted (personal safety, adequate food, housing, health services and so on) no longer tend to embrace religion for comfort, whereas third world countries have the opposite experience.

I think LGBTQ+ communities help hugging. Public hugs are part of their ways of life, perhaps to reassure those vulnerable to prejudicial undercurrents that there are people who love them no matter what.

That may also be why "real" men aren't big on hugging.