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COLLECTIVE

HUB

ISSUE 48

YOUR LIFE CAN BE
ANYTHING

WHERE WILL
YOU TAKE IT?

WHY YOU
NEED A
PEER
MENTOR

CARA
DELEVINGNE



ELIZABETH
OLSEN

ON CREATIVITY

STARTUP
SPECIAL

(AND WHAT IT'LL REALLY COST YOU)



At a CUDDLE PARTY you can expect more SKIN CONTACT than at a salsa class in summer – but it’s a wholesome experience with SURPRISING benefits.

WORDS CHE-MARIE TRIGG

If you’ve ever been to a party solo, you’ll know the feeling of standing on the doorstep, waiting for the door to open and wondering if anyone will talk to you. Now throw in the fact that you’re attending a cuddle party, where you’ll be in a room full of strangers who will spend several hours hugging, stroking and holding each other, and the nerves increase tenfold. Usually I’m someone who avoids touching other people as much as possible but, for the next few hours, I will let strangers spoon me, stroke my arms and hold my hands. I’m terrified.

Cuddle Party, a recognised not-for-profit, was founded in 2004 by two US relationship coaches, Reid Mihalko and Marcia Baczynski. Their aim? To create

a safe environment in which adults can explore communication, boundaries and non-sexual touch through hugging. From its beginnings in the US, Cuddle Party has since spawned chapters in cities across the world, from Melbourne to Seattle, in 17 countries.

I am attending a party in East London, at the home of Stella Anna Sonnenbaum, a somatic sexologist who has been running these events since 2015.

“A lot of people live very much in their brain and in their heads, and a lot of people are very touch-deprived – especially with the rise of single-people households,” says Stella, who is German-born and exudes an aura of calm.

“People rely on receiving touch from their romantic partners only. If that partner is not really touchy-feely, they

end up not having touch at all.”

Stella believes that, as a society, we don’t place nearly enough importance on being mindful when we touch others – whether that be with a partner, friends or, in this case, complete strangers.

“Sometimes it’s good to take a step back and take a look at what we do touch-wise,” explains Stella. “Especially with people who have been cohabiting for many years, they tend to touch each other quite unconsciously. It can be very hurtful, because you touch your partner like a piece of furniture. Becoming aware of what you’re actually doing when you’re touching your partner [is important].”

For Stella and those who attend her gatherings, cuddle parties are about asserting and respecting boundaries, about requesting permission to touch someone else and understanding that, rejection, when it comes to touch at least, shouldn’t be taken personally. But cuddling also has myriad side benefits. When we hug another human for more than 20 seconds, oxytocin courses through our body. This hormone can strengthen the immune system and lower blood pressure. Known as the ‘love molecule’, it can also improve self-esteem. High levels of oxytocin can ease pain and help reduce stress. If those are the benefits of merely hugging someone – even if it’s someone I’ve never seen before – then count me in.

In a large sunny room on the top level of Stella’s home, the group participating in today’s party sits on mattresses and pillows on the floor. An eclectic bunch, most seem to have been here before – several of them appear to be friends. I’m definitely the youngest attendee; there are two other women and four men. At first, everyone seems shy; a couple of people make small talk as we wait for the party to start. There are nibbles and tea

set up – Stella has previously told me that people often sit and observe the cuddling while nursing a cuppa.

It’s quite pleasant in the room, and an unseasonably warm spring day in London. Once everyone has arrived, Stella joins us. The party begins with a ‘welcome circle’, where Stella reads out the 11 rules of the cuddle party. These include no sexual touch, that you must respect others’ boundaries, and – Stella’s favourite rule – you are always allowed to change your mind.

“You are encouraged to change your mind, to be authentic in every moment,” says Stella. “That is still something in daily life we can’t do, because we need to take other people into account. Changing our minds all the time can seem flaky. But in this safe space of [the] cuddle party, we are encouraged to try this out. It’s quite profound.”

During the welcome circle we do a few exercises. First, we give setting boundaries a whirl. In groups of three, we ask each other increasingly absurd questions: “Can I stroke your arm?”; “Can I cut your hair?”; “Can I tickle your feet?”. To each question – no matter how much we actually want it to happen – we must answer ‘no’. Easy enough. The next exercise is saying ‘yes’. Admittedly, it is difficult to respond ‘yes’ when someone you’ve only just met asks if they can cut off all your hair. But I push through.

After a few more exercises, it’s time to get to the actual cuddling. First we have to see how many hugs we can give and receive in 60 seconds. As I’m still not so sure how I feel about strangers hugging me (I struggle enough hugging my closest friends), I hang back, but acquiesce when others approach me. Surprisingly, it’s not quite as strange

as I thought it would be. I only rack up three hugs... but they’re long, and it’s my first time, so I don’t feel too bad.

We return to our groups of three, and tell each other what sort of touch we would like to receive from the other members. The man in our group asks for us to stroke his arms and legs. One woman wants to lie on the floor, while we use our feet to lightly shake her all over. (I’m impressed by the specificity of her request!) I just ask for the two to hold my hands; I don’t want to go overboard.

As I stroke the man’s back and then

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jiggle the woman’s body, I realise that I’m being a bit of a wimp. Changing my mind, I ask them to stroke my arms and legs as I lie on my stomach. It feels surprisingly soothing, and I can’t imagine ever asking a partner or friend to do the same.

After the structured session, it’s time for more ‘free-form’ hugs. The girl in my group asks to hold me and I agree. For the next 20 minutes or so she sits behind me, hugging me, and we make small talk. It’s weird, but less weird the longer it goes on. Then we move to the floor and spoon, hugging lying down. This is slightly stranger – like most people, I associate spooning with relationships and non-platonic touch. But, better journalists than I have endured far more intensity for the sake of a story – embedding themselves in war for instance – and I think I can handle half an hour of spooning.

Eventually the rest of the group comes and lies on the floor in one long group spoon. Soon enough it’s time to sit up and participate in the next, and

last, activity – a ‘cuddle puddle’. One person lies in the middle of the room. The rest of the group gradually moves towards them, lying on top of different parts of their body. I place a cushion on the first person’s shins and tentatively lie on top of it. After a couple of rounds of this, we are all handed blindfolds for the last cuddle puddle, feeling our way into the centre of the room before piling

on top of each other. We lie there for a while, and then it’s all over.

And – I feel good. In fact, the buzz that I experience afterwards reminds me of the afterglow of a good

yoga class. I feel grounded, like my mind and body are one, and energised. It’s not hard to see why people come back time and time again.

Stella says that around one-third of the attendees – not this week specifically, just in general – attend cuddle parties because they are lonely. People have brought their mothers to work on their touch issues; others have fallen in love.

“Speaking for me, personally, I’ve become more authentic, I’m asking myself all the time, ‘Is this right in this moment?’,” says Stella. “So I hope that’s the same for other people as well.”

The people at the party I attended seemed worried I would paint them as weird, but they’re just as diverse or interesting as any other random group of people. One of the men I spoke to is a huge David Bowie fan and showed me some of his paintings of the musician. Another mentioned that his son finds it strange that he attends cuddle parties, while another woman was heading off to her second cuddle party of the day immediately afterwards. We all agreed that it made us feel good. And, really, isn’t that all any of us want? ■