

## The Power of a Teddy Bear

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By Christopher Shea

People who feel the pain of social rejection often retreat from human interaction—which, of course, is a self-defeating move—but touching a teddy bear may counteract the tendency, [a new study finds](#).

The study had two parts. In the first, researchers gave 181 undergraduates a personality test, followed by bogus results. Some subjects were told they'd been diagnosed as “the type who will end up alone later in life.” Others were told they were almost certain to have “rewarding relationships.” (There was also a control group that was told they were accident-prone, or not accident-prone.) After this spot of cheery or depressing news, participants were asked to evaluate a teddy bear, which, they were told, was being considered for sale.

Half the participants were encouraged to hold the bear as they evaluated it, while the others could only look at it from a few feet away.

After that, all participants were offered the chance to volunteer for more studies, which would involve more time interacting with people in a lab setting. People primed to think about future social exclusion who had touched the bear volunteered for twice as many experiments, on average, as people primed to think about exclusion who did not touch the bear.

The second part of the study involved more forceful social rejection. Ninety-five undergraduates were brought into the lab, in groups, and asked to express a preference for a partner. Some students were (falsely) told that no one had picked them, others (falsely) that everyone had. The teddy-bear exercise followed.

Among the socially rejected students, the subjects who touched the teddy bear acted more cooperatively in a subsequent strategy game requiring coordination.

The authors conclude by saying that it's not the teddy bear, per se, that mattered, but touching an anthropomorphized object, which seems to supply some of the benefits of human touch.

So: Can consolation robots be far behind? The authors mention the possibility. (Future studies will have to determine whether they have to be soft and fuzzy.)



“Touching a Teddy Bear Mitigates Negative Effects of Social Exclusion to Increase Prosocial Behavior,” Kenneth Tai, Xue Zheng and Jayanth Narayanan, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (forthcoming)