

body & soul

Saturday October 16, 2004 ■ "When one is pretending the entire body revolts" Anaïs Nin, 1903-1977

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The grope dynamic

Would you like to cuddle a bunch of people you'd never met before? **Tessa Souter** embraces the latest US craze

"Do you mind if I stroke your hair?" asks John, politely. It is Sunday morning and I'm in my Mum's red satin pyjamas lying with my head on John's chest. We're discussing the intimate details of our lives: past relationships, family, love, sex — all the normal things. Only this isn't normal. Because John is a total stranger. As is Lynne, who is simultaneously massaging my left foot. And Joe, who is nuzzling the back of my neck. And Carol, who is lying with her head on my stomach. As for Mike, who is stroking my satin pyjama jacket, dangerously close to my breasts: "Er, would you mind not doing that," I say. "Oh sorry!" he laughs, sheepishly.

No, this isn't an orgy. It's a "cuddle party". And 14 of us are lying in a "puppy pile" on the floor of an Upper East Side apartment in New York — not a touchy-feely city. "There are eight million people in New York and 7.5 million of them are lonely," says Lynne, who came to her first cuddle party two weeks ago, feeling brought down by life. Her mother had died, her 2-year-old niece died on the day of her mother's funeral, she broke up with her boyfriend, lost her job, and found out she might have a rare (and terminal) form of cancer. All within six months. "I was drained dry," she says. "I thought: 'I need to be held.' The transformation from that one session was incredible. "It was like therapy," she says. And at \$30 (£17) or \$40 per couple for a three-hour session, it's a lot cheaper.

"It has taken off," says Marcia Baczynski, a 26-year-old relationship coach, who runs the parties with the founder Reid Mihalko, a 36-year-old sex coach. "Touch is important for immunity and for psychological health." Blond, bronzed and buff, Mihalko came up with the idea when some friends jokingly suggested that he should market his cuddling skills.

Seven months ago he hosted the first cuddle party at the apartment he shares with his 10ft (3m) python Angel. Baczynski says. "I thought we'd do maybe one a month. But by the second or third month it was already a full-time job." Since then, the pair have run cuddle parties in Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Washington, and plan to take it to the the "touch-deprived" worldwide. "The next level is to teach people to throw their own cuddle parties," says Mihalko.

So what exactly is a cuddle party? "It is an event for adults to get together and to explore affectionate touch and communication without it becoming sexualised," says the blurb on the website (www.cuddleparty.com). However, things do occasionally veer in that direction.

"If you get an erection, that's OK. Just don't

start dry-humping things," warns Mihalko, during his introduction. "Don't act on it. Breathe. It doesn't mean anything." This is so important it is posted on the bathroom door. "Rule No 7: No dry humping." Rule No 1 is Pyjamas stay on. If there is a "sexual emergency", Mihalko says he will ring a bell to draw attention to it. "It's not about making sex wrong. But it is not appropriate here." He has never had to ring the bell.

It may be that Mihalko is tapping into the US Zeitgeist. Increasing numbers of young Americans are turning their backs on sex and declaring their asexuality online (www.asexuality.org). One study by Brock University in St Catherine's, Canada, suggests that there are as many asexuals as there are homosexuals.

Given this trend it is not surprising that cuddle parties have caught on. But don't go without telling your significant other. That would be "un-cuddly" — a term for anything bad such as,

IN A 'SEXUAL EMERGENCY', MIHALKO RINGS A BELL TO DRAW ATTENTION TO IT

for example, coming to a cuddle party without revealing that you are a journalist.

At the start of the session everyone (a mixed group in terms of age, attractiveness and ethnicity) takes it in turns to introduce themselves. They are all here either out of curiosity or because they've been before and enjoyed it. Joe is part of the polyamory community — people who have open relationships — and is here with his beautiful Brazilian wife Alessandra. "My sweetie told me about it," he says, referring to his girlfriend in New York (his wife lives in California). It's his third cuddle party in ten days. "I also went to the men-only party because I'm bisexual." Alessandra is here as an "utter sceptic". Being Brazilian, she says she is used to a lot of touch. But she is curious to see if it "pans out" to cuddle someone you don't know. Everyone is a "cuddle monster".

We start with a standing group hug and then are instructed to fall on to the floor and form a "puppy pile". Within minutes we are all sharing secrets that you wouldn't normally tell anyone until you'd known them for months — if not years. "So, do you and Alessandra ever get jealous of each other's other relationships?" I ask Joe. "Sometimes but not often," he says. "Is this OK?" he says, spooning me. (I can't quite bring myself to say no.) Once in a while (three hours is a long time to lie in one position), everyone does a group reshuffle. "Oh, I see a spot right there. Can I dive in?" says Kristen, indicating a space in the middle.



VERNON BALLARD

CUDDLE PARTY RULES

- Pyjamas stay on the whole time.
- No sex.
- Ask for permission to kiss or nuzzle anyone.
- No dry-humping
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- If you're in a relationship, set your boundaries and agreements before you go to the cuddle party. Don't re-negotiate those agreements/boundaries during the cuddle party. (Trust us on this one.)
- Crying and giggling are both welcomed and encouraged.
- Outside of your personal relationships, it's nobody's business who you cuddle, so please be respectful of other people's privacy when sharing with the outside world about cuddle parties.
- Be hygienically savvy.
- Clean up after yourself.
- Always practise good cuddle manners.

WE FALL INTO A 'PUPPY PILE' AND WITHIN MINUTES ARE SHARING INTIMATE SECRETS

It's all very polite. "Do you mind if I massage your shoulders?" "Would it be OK if...?" The strangest sensation is the feeling that it should feel weird but it actually doesn't. "It creates an intimacy," says Kristen. "It feels safe."

Up close and personal: enjoying a "puppy pile" in the Upper East Side, New York

"I had no idea when we started this what would come up," says Mihalko. "We've had rape and incest survivors come. We even had a phone call from a soldier in Iraq who'd seen us on CNN and wanted to know if there were going to be any cuddle parties in his home town when he got back. He thought that it would be good for stress."

His biggest satisfaction comes from seeing the difference it makes to the people who come. "I just love seeing the expressions on their faces when they leave, in comparison to how they looked when they came in," he says.

Lynne says: "It opened me up again after my heart shut down. I was more available and it carried over into the rest of my life." She would like to leave New York but has to stay in the city because if she leaves she will lose her medical insurance. "This makes living here more manageable."