



The Post-Standard

K-I-S-S-I-N-G

Get smart about smooches

Thursday, February 08, 2007

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Pucker up Valentine's Day is almost here.

So what if you don't have a romantic partner to smooch on Feb. 14? There are plenty of people out there who could use some good kissing.

That's the way Andrea Demirjian looks at it. Demirjian's book, "Kissing: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About One of Life's Sweetest Pleasures," came out last year after a few years of intense kiss research.

"Kissing is a natural elixir," Demirjian said. "It helps lower blood pressure, it gets your endorphins going and lifts your mood, it boosts your immune system and overall, it makes you feel good."

Kissing burns calories, too, she said. A single kiss can burn two to 11 calories depending on the intensity. It also increases saliva, which cleans the mouth. Kissing works jaw and neck muscles, too.

"I tell women it's a great way to save money on that face lift," said Demirjian, who is based in Manhattan.

To get the facts about the tradition of the kiss, The Daily Dose went to kissing experts Demirjian; Vaughn Bryant, a professor of anthropology at Texas A&M University; and William Cane, author of "The Art of Kissing" and "Kiss Like a Star: Smooching Secrets from the Silver Screen." Here's what they had to say:

Does everyone kiss?

No, but about 90 percent of people in the world do. In regions of the Himalayas, people do not kiss. They believe that sharing saliva is unhealthy because of the bacteria in the mouth, Demirjian said.

In parts of Africa, people do not kiss on the mouth because they believe the mouth is a portal to the soul, and that kissing might allow one's soul to be taken from them.

Other cultures were introduced to kissing fairly recently. For example, in Japan, the word for kiss is "kissu," from the English word "kiss," Bryant said. That suggests the Japanese did not kiss until the arrival of European influence. Kissing in public remains taboo in Japan and China.

Why does kissing feel so good?

Kisses feel especially good because the lips have more nerve endings than any other part of the body, except for certain areas of the sex organs, Bryant said. This makes sense of touch on the lips very highly developed. Taste and smell also factor into the enjoyment of a kiss. The sight of the kissing partner and the sounds of breath help make kissing a pleasurable experience.

Why do we kiss?

Anthropologists disagree on this point. Some believe kissing is instinctive that it began millions of years ago from the mouth-to-mouth feeding of mothers to their young. Others, like Bryant, believe kissing is a learned behavior that started in certain cultures and spread to many others because it was so enjoyable.

"If kissing were genetic, then we'd all be kissing," Bryant said. "But when Europeans explored the Americas, parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, those people didn't kiss."

In the mid-1800s, one English explorer made a terrible mistake by trying to kiss his love interest, the daughter of a West African king. She screamed and ran to her father in tears, afraid the explorer was trying to eat her.

The history of kissing

India claims the first written documentation of kissing. By 1,500 BC, oral history (no pun intended) was becoming written history through Sanskrit texts. These texts made references to using the mouth to touch and "sniff." The poem, the Mahabharata, written about 1,000 BC, included phrases about setting "mouth to mouth."

From India, kissing spread to the west. Alexander the Great's army conquered parts of northern India in 326 BC. The soldiers learned to kiss and, after the death of Alexander, brought the practice with them throughout the Middle East. From there, kissing spread to areas of Rome and Greece, Bryant said.

Kissing facts and figures

The X used to symbolize a kiss in letters or Valentines may have come from the days when people who could not write marked an X instead of signing their name. Or it could have developed from the Christian cross, as a sign of love, Bryant said.

According to Cane's research, two-thirds of people kiss with their eyes closed. The rest prefer to watch the action.

Nearly everyone, 98 percent of people surveyed, like some form of a public display of affection.

Two-thirds of men prefer a woman to not wear lipstick during a kiss. Eight percent said they like when a woman wears lipstick if it has flavor.

Women say their favorite place to be kissed is the lips, followed by the neck.

According to Demirjian's surveys, 66 percent of women said they would give up sex before they would give up kissing.

About 40 percent of people have their first kiss by age 14. And most people remember the details of that first kiss many years later.

Most young men want kissing to lead to sex. But as men get into their 40s and 50s they often enjoy kissing for the sake of kissing.

Types of kisses

"Everyone loves to French kiss," Cane said, citing his study of 100,000 people in the United States and 23 other countries. But there are many other kisses couples can try.

There's the sliding kiss, a line of miniature kisses on any part of the body. There's "lip-o-suction," where one smoocher kisses his partner's upper lip while his partner kisses his bottom lip. Then they switch back and forth.

A vacuum kiss calls for both partners to suck the air out of each other's mouths while kissing, Cane said. But 80 percent of people have never tried this one.

Just don't let the "air smack" catch, on or it could be the death of kissing as we know it, Bryant said. He defines an air smack as a kiss in which a person goes in for a smooch but doesn't quite touch. Instead they make a kissy noise in the air, so as to avoid smearing makeup. That trend will not do, he said.

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