

## Hugging is winning



Mata Amritanandamayi embracing a child at a temple festival in Kochi. Joyous devotees around her wait for their turn.

When Mata Amritanandamayi, the hugging saint as she is known in the West, visited Kochi last week, people waited for hours to see her and feel her warm embrace.

A touch, a few whispered words and a touch on the head made these visitors, including the celebrities, smile contently or cry with joy.

"Her touch was magical, I felt like she was giving me the power to solve my problem. And I realised how much I had missed a good hug," says Anjana Vinod, a first time visitor to the temple. She may not realise it, but Mata Amritanandamayi is doing what mothers know how to do best — give a hug to console, comfort and let children know they care.

A warm enveloping hug that tells you not to worry can go a long way in soothing your emotions — there is no need for a words. Studies have proved that a gentle, caring embrace is a very important mode of communication. And it has a very powerful dimension as far as human interaction is concerned. Because, a warm embrace is a magical tool that creates emotions in us, making us feel happy and emotionally secure.

Not all Malayalis shower their emotions through hugging. A hug, a back rub, a hand on the shoulder and a pat on the head may mean a lot, but many consider these gestures shows of vulnerability that spoil the image of being a strong individual in control of his or her emotions.

And doctors disagree. They want people to hug more, and hug long. Research shows that a hug for at least six seconds can pump up the flow of mood-boosting chemicals. And there is more.

A person is 47 percent more likely to be closer to a family member who hugs a lot. Of course it feels good to hear 'I love you' but a hug can tell you more.

"In parenting, we always stress the need for touch. Hug your children when they are upset and show them you care. A good hug can make a huge impact. Sadly, our society has not understood it yet. In fact we abuse touch, we reserve it for harassing women in buses or exploiting children," says psychiatrist C. J. John.

"If a hug is consoling and relaxing, it can bring down anxiety levels and change the physical state of the person. When a priest puts his hand on your head and prays, you will automatically feel strong. That is power of touch," says Dr John.

It has been found that frequent huggers have lower blood pressure levels and higher levels of oxytocin, the chemical that promotes bonding.

That is the reason why a new mass movement with free hugs for passers by — Action for Happiness, has been launched in London for a happier society. The foundation is planning to create more happiness through daily actions, to lift millions out of their misery.

So, it is better to play a hug of war, where everyone hugs. And wins.