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By **Robert Cribb**
Staff Reporter

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After locking eyes recently at a conference with an old friend and colleague I haven't seen in a couple of years, I watch in mystification as he approaches with arms spread in a sweeping pre-embrace gesture.

What proceeds is a full-on man hug that seems to last for 12 minutes.

He's a very nice man. But I'm sorry, it's weird.



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I don't hug women I'm interested in romantically for that long or with that degree of vigour.

I'm not alone.

Growing discomfort with this contemporary male greeting ritual has become a popular culture plot line, most recently in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* where main character Larry David recoils at the awkward physical familiarity claimed by a male sort-of friend.

Proposition: Ancient rules of male propriety are being routinely breached with impunity with all of this physically intimate hugging. What remains is a strange, undefined social chaos each time two men come together in a clumsy mishmash of conflicting expectations.

Do we still extend our hand to a friend like dad taught? Or are we all expected to lean in for a four-arm body merge whenever a familiar fellow flashes a smile? Are there separate protocols for the office and the ball field? And what level of familiarity is required to move from handshake to entanglement? Second meeting? Thirtieth?

Some clarity is required here.

Let's start with the obvious: The full hug — an act historically shared between parents and children, girlfriends or husbands and wives — must be abolished for all man-man meetings. It's awkward and ridiculous.

As men, we possess ancient affection rituals that are far more expressive and culturally entrenched: We hit each other, hurl epithets, place each other's skulls in headlocks and verbally bash with relentless fervour.

It may be a more covert form of warmth than the female-devised hug ritual. But every man knows the kindness that lies beneath. We are honoured to reach the status of verbal punching bag with male buds. It says "we are tight" with a straight-forward elegance no hug could match. A hugging half-measure does now exist with a more male-specific form of the act.

The hybrid handshake-and-hug combination, also known as the "pound hug," "dude hug," "hetero hug," and "hip-hop hug," has made its way from black culture to mainstream, prompting white guys everywhere to greet each other like they're members of Jay Z's posse.

Execution involves keeping right hands firmly locked in a handshake as left hands reach around to "pound" the other guy's back.

Rather than exposing the chest, the dude hug allows us to keep an arm's width separation while still expressing fraternity with a one-arm half-embrace that includes a macho-infused hand pound optimally executed with a fist.

And the timing of the dude hug is also noteworthy: One, maybe two, seconds.

A semblance of sanity restored.

“The man hug and the female hug are quite different,” says Gilda Carle, psychotherapist, relationship educator and author. “The female hug is closer, no fear of breasts touching. The male hug is that dance, sometimes with three steps, with a touch of the shoulders, not the chest.”

Anthropologically speaking, the increasing manifestation of public man hugs in the West is evidence of cultural change from aloof stoicism to the sensitive metrosexualism, says Phillips Stevens Jr., an anthropologist at the University at Buffalo.

“The former image, strengthened by ambivalence toward homosexuality, is now considered potentially unhealthy. The latter, allowing the expression — or release—of emotion, is regarded as healthy.”

Another potential factor in the huggification of modern man: “Compensation theory.”

“If your father wasn’t affectionate and you feel cheated, you go in the other direction and compensate,” says Mark Morman, director of graduate studies and professor of human communications at Baylor University in Texas, who has researched and written about man hugging. “I think that’s really, really significant for what’s going on today.”

It accounts for why Morman is a hugger with his group of close male friends and his son.

“It was not a very good relationship with my own father and I didn’t understand why that was,” he says. “After I became a dad, I became more affectionate.”

And what of the hug between male and female friends?

Most experts say an opposite-sex hug routine is appropriate if the two are close.

I say no eager mushing together of male and female breasts is ever appropriate as a greeting marker of friends.

Air kiss and be done with it.

Some may call the anti-hug argument myopic.

Male hugging and even kissing is standard protocol in some cultures including the Middle East, Latin America and southern European.

But let us not be culturally derivative.

There's no accounting for the ritualistic follies of others.

Or is there?

One theory, dubbed the "warm weather hypothesis," holds that sub-equator cultures are more affectionate than those in cold weather climates.

"Those in southern Europe are more affectionate than those in northern Europe," says Morman. "People in the southern United States are more affectionate than northerners. Warm weather makes people more affectionate and friendly. It has some merit."

The theory finds its downfall, however, here in Canada where our weather would suggest a cool formality which is clearly collapsing under the weight of southern cultural appropriation.

"We're not isolated anymore," Morman explains. "Everything bleeds together now."

Damn shame, I say.

Robert Cribb welcomes questions, comments and suggestions at rcribb@thestar.ca

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