



# A PSA for PDA

We all want mature adult relationships. But what happens when you inject your connection with a little teen spirit? One writer finds out.

By Sara Stillman Berger

“Kiss me,” Brandon whispered in my ear, his hands cupping my face while Dave Matthews crooned,

“You’ve got your ball/You’ve got your chain/Tied to me tight/Tie me up again.” It was one of those magical summer nights, the breeze tickling my skin like the softest touch.

Except I wasn’t in the middle of a dream about my high school crush. I was at an actual DMB concert, in front of strangers and friends. And it wasn’t the breeze on my skin—it was my husband’s hands. His sudden advance, as sweet as it was, caught me so off guard that I was left in a haze of confusion. Should I be embarrassed by our cuddling, or thankful that he still desired me, even after two kids, crow’s feet, and 11 years of marriage? And was I awful for not being sure which was more appropriate?

Turns out, my mixed reaction was totally fair. We typically associate public displays of affection (PDA) with new lovers who can’t keep their hands off each other, so when we see (or experience) it within a long-term relationship, it seems...out of place. But experts say that’s exactly why we should embrace it. “PDA represents a wanting, which validates how important your partner is to you,” says Lexington, Kentucky, couples therapist Juliana Morris, PhD. And we need this: 80 percent of men and women fantasize about feeling loved by and connected to someone, shows a study by Justin Lehmiller, PhD, a social psychologist at the Kinsey Institute. A random kiss or hand-hold can communicate those vibes. Studies prove that when couples touch, the stress hormone cortisol drops and the bonding hormone oxytocin skyrockets.



are rare, as our hands are typically occupied by smaller ones trying to break free. While we might peck-kiss goodbye, a true make-out session is about as common as hearing Dave Matthews on the radio in 2019.

Which is why the rom-com-worthy smooch took me by surprise, though after speaking with therapists for this story, I learned that my husband's go-for-it move wasn't unprovoked after all. The moment could be traced to the start of the night, when my girlfriends and I clustered in the back of the party bus while our mates sat in the front. I'm not sure if it was the sticky seats that reminded me of my prom limo, or because we were about to see a band from our college days, but I felt like a teenager again. I kept peeking at Brandon. When I saw him laughing, I wanted to be the one making him giggle. When I saw him swapping stories, I wanted to be the one listening to his tale. Weird, I know, but he must have felt the same. Once off the bus, he never left my side.

PDA doesn't have to be full-on frenching to effectively bond, Morris notes. It can be small moments, too, like how Brandon rested his chin on my head as we watched the stage. She calls these actions "little connectors" that allow partners to feel present and desired. "Couples who use words *and* actions to express that they want each other are much happier than those who don't," she says. Especially in long-term relationships, you should check in to ensure that you're meeting this need. (Most of us don't like asking for attention, so being proactive is its own act of validation.) One way to word it: "Do you know how hot I think you are?" It may not sound like much, but as with PDA, it conveys a lot.

In truth, Brandon and I argue just like anyone else. But the day after the concert, we felt closer than ever. We decided to ride the momentum with a short walk after dropping the kids at elementary school. Our phones started dinging, with group emails recounting evening take-aways, including: "The Bergers are legitimately in love." My cheeks flushed. Did we commit a major faux pas? Did we offend our friends? I smiled at my husband. I didn't even care.

When couples physically connect in public, they reinforce their commitment in the grand setting of the real world. Their actions not only say, "I want you right here, right now, no matter what," but also declare, "I choose you, just you, and no one else will do." That's a powerful statement.

It can be a seductive one too. Because being openly intimate is considered taboo, some couples may find it exciting. I'll admit, when Brandon kissed me, it did send a thrill through my body, even though I kept wondering who was watching. Or—according to Lehmiller—maybe that's why I felt turned on. Did I have an untapped desire to be the center of attention? Me, a total introvert?

Probably not. I think what sparked the quick rush of blood was the sheer novelty of the act. Lately, opportunities to just hold hands with Brandon



DON'T GET A ROOM

Think PDA should be left to the high school bleachers? As if! Here's how to lose the ick and make the bonding act a more consistent presence in your life.

**Start in private.**

Rest your leg over his on the couch, or give each other shoulder rubs after work. The more natural snuggling becomes at home, the less awkward being hands-on in a crowd will feel, says Lehmiller.

**Make more eye contact.**

It brings you closer and amps arousal, says Morris. Even if he doesn't feel the urge to kiss you mid-aisle at the grocery, you're telling him, "I can't wait to be alone with you later."

**Create a signal.**

A nonverbal sign that says "I think you're sexy" (one good one: a gentle ear tug) can mentally prepare—and excite—your partner for whatever's coming next. Plus, having a secret is titillating in itself.

**Think of the small stuff.**

Slip your finger up his sleeve or in his waistband while you're waiting in line, brush hair off his forehead, or rub his hand with your finger as you walk. Any skin-to-skin contact deepens intimacy. The more, the better.

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