

No Hugs Please, an Emoji Will Do. c. 2025 Carol Anth

Hugging has always been something I felt I could live without--I'm sure I received plenty of warm and fuzzies in my infant and early childhood years, but beyond that, getting up close and personal was not a common practice in my family. Fine by me.

Hugs from women were especially to be avoided in the early sixties. Besides being drenched with enough perfume to knock out an elephant, they almost always reeked of cigarette smoke as well. It was a hug to die from and Not something I would put up with unless there was money involved--like a Happy or Merry Something occasion that resulted in my getting a check for being such a good girl that year. Then I would just hold my breath and body in a cringe posture until the hug was over at which time my normal circulation and oxygen flow would return.

Okay, so some people may think it's weird to be so averse to hugging. But I'd say hug phobia is just as normal as a fear of large spiders or small dogs. And hugging that involves touching someone's face--definitely off limits in my world. I've had my share of fingernails well past due for a manicure scrape across my cheeks. If averting the invasion means the end of a relationship with the face grabber, so be it.

It took a long time--but now at 70 I've finally devised a graceful way to protect myself from well-intentioned albeit chronic huggers. When I perceive a hug other than one from my husband approaching, I deftly negotiate a 180 and pretend to have an allergic reaction, blowing my nose profusely and replicating the sound of a prehistoric animal clearing its throat, which literally blocks off all the space between the hugger and myself. It's been a life-saving way to set boundaries.

In these cases, the hugger almost always backs off and exclaims something like "Oh, no, are you all right, can I get you some water?" or "Should I call security?" The hug itself is all but forgotten and we part amicably with the promise not to be strangers and that we must do this again real soon.

Hugs among close family and friends require a different strategy. Male relatives with sweaty beards prone to giving bear hugs I just avoid all together. They are usually immersed in a football game anyway and hardly notice the fact that they haven't exchanged hellos with me yet until the family gathering we were all there for is long over. My sister, who has perfected the f-or rather brush-off hug, greets you with a lukewarm smile and then plants her ice-cold tentacles from one hand firmly on your shoulders for a deep squeeze. Before hypothermia sets in, she releases you with a gentle shove. I try to dress in layers on these occasions.

Since Covid hit and apparently is still hitting, the elbow hug has become popular. It's more personal than a handshake, yet still limits your exposure to bodies of unknown origin. I will preemptively offer the elbow hug as a gesture of friendship--at least to my younger friends. It seems to go over well enough and nobody gets hurt.

But the best hug of all is the hug that isn't. Now that everyone wears their cell phone, I find that physical hugs can be replaced with equally affectionate virtual ones. My own childhood best friend, another victim of the cigarette perfume filled hugs of the 60s, has embraced the art of virtual hugging. She has an emoji for every possible hug type: classic, bear, waist, sideways, patting, triangle, cuddle, one-armed, full-body, hands-free, timed-release, Over-the Counter, Under the table and of course the everything hug, which is also never-ending. But that's okay. Because it's virtual.. The virtual emoji-enriched hug is the state of the art cure for hug phobia. You can be sufficiently loved but you won't feel a thing.