

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN, PH.D.

Try To Feel It *My* Way

**New Help for Touch Dominant People
and Those Who Care About Them**

A breakthrough communication technique from the author of
the bestselling *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*

Try to Feel It MY Way

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New Help
for Touch Dominant People
and Those Who
Care About Them

Suzette Haden Elgin, Ph.D.

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Preface

Everywhere you look today there are books and audio programs and seminars on dealing with “Difficult People.” Bosses who never stop complaining and criticizing, no matter how good your work is. Relatives who always find a way to pick a fight, even when everybody present is determined not to let it happen. Colleagues who aren’t happy unless everybody else is miserable. Employees that nobody can talk to without feeling insulted and infuriated. Kids who whine and sulk and have no friends. JERKS . . . the people you duck into doorways to hide from if you can, because even a few minutes with them leaves your head pounding and your stomach churning. We all know and dread these people. (Some of us *are* these people, and have to live with the knowledge that others find us hard to get along with.)

This book won’t give you yet another set of tips for easing your encounters with difficult people. Instead, I’m going to demonstrate to you that many “difficult people” aren’t difficult at all. They behave the way they do because they are reacting much as you would react if you found yourself forced to use a foreign language for understanding and learning and communicating. These people aren’t difficult—they’re *touch dominant*. You may never have heard that phrase before; let me explain.

By the time children get to be five or six years old, they discover that one of our major sensory systems (sight or hear-

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ing or touch) *works* better for them than the others do. And just as their being right- or left-handed does not change, this dominant sense will not change. The sight dominant, for whom what matters is how things *look*, will have an advantage, because sight is the sense our culture values most. The hearing dominant, for whom what matters is how things *sound*, are somewhat less advantaged, but they'll still do all right. The majority—the Eye Tribe—are willing to agree that hearing also has importance and significance.

But what about people for whom the most important sense is *touch*? For touch dominant persons of *all* ages, information for the eyes and the ears isn't enough. To understand and learn and remember, they need information for the *flesh*. When they are tense or upset, they need to use the words and body language that go with touching, the vocabulary of the skin and the gut. (Do “information for the *flesh*” and “vocabulary of the skin and the gut” make you uneasy? Why? They're neither obscene nor inflammatory. Stay tuned.) We cut these individuals no slack in our culture, and the result is their most constant lament: “I just don't get it!”

Think about it: What would it be like to be touch dominant?

Imagine being someone whose dominant sense is touch, in a “Don't TOUCH!” society like ours where everything that matters most to you—down to the very words and body language you use under stress—is rejected by others. How would you manage? How good would your “people skills” be? Might you not rub people the wrong way and earn the label “difficult” for *yourself*?

This book will take you into the world of touch dominance and help you understand that world, alien as it may seem at first. It will help you understand the language of touch dominance, which is not as different from your language as Chinese or Cherokee but is still a communication barrier, and a barrier that's highest in anxious moments when good communication is the one thing most desperately needed. I will

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show you that when “difficult” is really “touch dominant,” a set of simple language techniques can bring about changes that seem almost miraculous. Strange as the whole idea of touch dominance may be to you now, by the time you reach the end of this book, I promise you: You will “get it.” And if you are yourself a touch dominant person, you will find yourself, for perhaps the first time, understanding why “getting it” is often so hard for *you*.

How to Use this Book

Chapter One is an introduction to the concept of touch dominance and its role in our lives. In Chapter Two we’ll consider what life is like for touch dominant children and what problems it typically causes for them; Chapter Three covers that same territory for touch dominant adults. Chapters Four and Five offer ways to help with the problems; Chapter Six speaks directly to the touch dominant reader. Chapter Seven takes up the very special and thorny problems that touch dominance can cause for adults in their most intimate relationships.

The chapters contain dialogues and scenarios that show how touch dominance can lead to turmoil and communication breakdown—together with techniques for handling those consequences, and rewrites that demonstrate how applying the suggestions can make more positive outcomes possible. In addition, they include workout sections with additional materials that give you opportunities to use and expand your new information and skills. The appendices supplement the text with a sampler of American Sign Language words and phrases and a touch language version of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” for reading to TD children. Finally, the references and bibliography at the end of the book will take you to many more sources of information about touch and the language of touch, and the book’s index will make it easy for you to find information quickly and conveniently.

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You may want to just read through the book quickly to get a basic understanding of its subject; or you may want to do the workout sections as you go along, to deepen your understanding. Either way, you'll notice something unusual: In *this* book, when a choice exists between a word or phrase in touch language and one that comes from the vocabulary of sight or hearing, I've tried always to use the touch item, even when it would not be the choice a teacher of English composition (or my editors) would consider best.

That's fair—because almost everything else you read in English will make the opposite choice, in order to *avoid* touch language. It's also useful, because your reaction to my choices will get my message across to you in a way that nothing else could. If you are touch dominant yourself, you will be reading a book that (as far as is possible for English) is put together using *your* language, for once. If you're not touch dominant, your negative reactions—"Goodness, what a crude way to put that!" and "Why in the world did she use such a colloquialism?" and "That doesn't sound very educated to me!"—will bring home to you forcefully how biased our culture is against everything that has to do with touch and the language of touch.

I could not have written this book without the help of many other people—far more than I have room to list here. I am especially grateful to the thousands of people who have responded to my writing and speaking about touch dominance by sharing with me their own ideas and stories of their own experiences as (or with) TD persons. On the list of people whose names I *do* have to set down here are . . . My graduate adviser, Leonard Newmark, who taught me how to make people want to learn and how to bring them through the learning experience successfully. Linguist John Grinder, who was my colleague in my earliest investigations of touch dominance and touch language. Virginia Satir and Edward T. Hall, who laid the foundations for much of my work with the subject.

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My long-suffering family, on whom I can always count for support and tolerance. My editors at John Wiley & Sons, and especially senior editor PJ Dempsey and production editor Joanne Palmer.

To the many I have not named, and to those upon whose work I have built, my grateful thanks; to anyone I may have overlooked in spite of my best intentions, I sincerely apologize. The responsibility for mistakes and omissions must all be laid at my door.

If you have comments or questions, I would be pleased to hear from you. Feel free to write me directly, anytime; I will get back to you as quickly and fully as I can.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Rough Row to Hoe

Dialogue One

Between a Teacher and a Child

Child: “Mrs. Harper? I need some help—I don’t get this!”

Teacher: “That’s because you aren’t even looking at it! How do you expect to learn anything that way? It’s not written on the ceiling, you know! As usual—you’re just not trying.”

Child: “I am trying, but it’s too hard! I just don’t get it, that’s all!”

Teacher: “Look, Sharon, I don’t have time for this nonsense. You pay attention to your work, and don’t let me see you staring out the window or up at the ceiling. Keep your eyes on your page and try again—and please don’t bother me with any more of your ridiculous excuses!”

Dialogue Two

Between a Man and a Woman at the Office

Man: “Helen, I haven’t seen those sales charts we asked you for yet. I’m sure it was clear that we wanted them as fast as possible. . . . Are they finished?”

Woman: “We don’t need those charts, Jack.”

Man: “Of course we need them! We have to be able to see our sales figures!”

Woman: “Jack, I can put my finger on any information we need, anytime. It’s all right here in my head, and I can get at it a lot quicker than you can dig it out of a bunch of charts and graphs!”

Man: “Oh. I see. As usual, Helen, you’ve decided not to cooperate with the rest of us.”

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The teacher in Dialogue One believes that the student isn’t trying—*as usual*. The salesman in Dialogue Two believes that his colleague is deliberately sabotaging the sales team’s efforts—*as usual*. Are they right?

Maybe so. Certainly there are youngsters who dislike school and won’t do much more than keep their desks warm if they can get away with it. And there *are* adults who are just contrary and who seem to enjoy making life difficult for everyone around them. But there’s another possibility. It may be that the student and the saleswoman in the dialogues are nothing at all like the images the teacher and the salesman have of them. It may be that they are both *touch dominant*. Let’s look at a more detailed example of the kind of communication problems that touch dominance can lead to; look at Scenario One, please.

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Scenario One

“Carolyn, I do not see why you won’t at least try to help me a little!” said Mary Whitney. “You’re not a baby, you’re fifteen years old! Can’t you see that this is important?”

Carolyn shrugged, and mumbled a quick “Sorry,” but she didn’t look up from her plate, and she didn’t stop eating.

“Carolyn!” said her father sharply. “Will you please look at your mother when she talks to you?!”

The teenager put down her knife and fork, sighing, and did as she was told. “Okay, Mom,” she said. “What do you want me to do?”

“One simple little thing,” Mary answered. “Just tell me what color you want your room to *be*, that’s all. The painters will be here tomorrow—I can’t wait any longer.”

Carolyn shrugged her shoulders again, slouching in her chair. “I don’t care, Mom,” she said.

“Oh, Carolyn! Not again!”

Mary turned to Frank, completely at the end of her patience. “See?” she demanded. “You see what I mean?”

“Sure,” Frank said. “Sure I see—and it’s clear that she has no intention of helping you. You ought to be used to that by now.” He stood up and pushed back his chair, setting his coffee cup down in its saucer. “I’ll leave you to it, honey,” he said, “and I wish you luck; I have to leave or I’ll be late. But this is the way she *always* is, Mary; I don’t see why you’re surprised.”

When Frank had gone, Mary stared sadly at her daughter. “Well,” she said slowly, “I guess I’ll have to pick the color myself. I don’t see any other way to solve this.”

“That’s okay, Mom,” the girl said. “That’s fine with me.”

“But it’s your room, Carolyn! You’re the one who has to look at it all the time!”

Carolyn frowned, blinking fiercely to keep back the tears, and wrapped her arms tightly around her shoulders, hugging herself hard. “I don’t get it,” she said miserably. “Now what did I do wrong?”

What's Going on Here?

This is a sad scene, but it's not unusual. When only one member of a family or group is touch dominant, this kind of scene can be expected. The problem here is that the parents believe this is happening because their daughter is deliberately refusing to cooperate and do her part in family projects. The problem is that this teenager doesn't know how to make her parents understand that that's not true, and has no idea how to explain. This is *communication breakdown*.

Mary and Frank Whitney are both sight dominant. They literally cannot *believe* that Carolyn is telling them the simple truth when she says "I don't care what color you paint my room." The way things *look* is so important to them that they can't imagine someone being indifferent about a color choice of that kind. Every time they ask their daughter to join in a discussion about visual things, however, the end result is the same: Both parents are angry, and the child is miserable and bewildered.

It seems to Carolyn that saying "Whatever you want to do is okay with me" *is* cooperating. It seems to her that she's always getting in trouble for telling the truth and for doing exactly what they're asking her to do. But it seems to her parents that she is an uncooperative, stubborn, annoying child who goes out of her way to be hard to get along with.

Suppose the parents are mistaken. Suppose that touch dominance is at the heart of this ongoing misunderstanding. What does that mean?

What Is Touch Dominance?

All human beings function in this world by processing information from the environment. We do this by using our *sensory systems*: sight and hearing and taste and smell and touch, plus perhaps as many as a dozen others that are less familiar. We use all our sensory systems that are in working order, to

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gather information and to handle it once it's gathered; we *need* them all.

When something stands in the way of using one sensory system, we fall back on the others to make up for it. Suppose you're exploring a cave and your only flashlight goes out and leaves you in total darkness. You don't just freeze where you are and give up all hope! You use your hands and feet to feel your way along. You listen as hard as you can for the clues your ears provide about the world around you. You will manage to get out of the cave and back into the light, even without being able to see where you're going, by using the information from your other sensory systems. Using all our senses, putting together the information from all of them, is how we survive.

But every one of us, by about the age of five or six, learns that one sensory system works better for us than the others do. We come to prefer that sensory system because we discover that it lets us take in more information, understand it better, remember it longer, and use it more efficiently. That system then becomes our *dominant* sensory system.

For the majority of people in the mainstream culture in today's United States of America, the preferred system is either sight or hearing. We don't know why. It may be that more people are born with eye or ear dominance; it may be that in our "Don't touch!" culture more of us *learn* to prefer our eyes or ears. Most likely, it's a combination of the two. Whatever the cause, the phenomenon is one we all know well. We can ask any teacher about the children in a class and get reports like these:

"It makes no difference how many times you tell Jason how to do something. If you want him to do it right, you have to let him read about it, or watch a video, or look at some kind of picture or diagram."

"Mary can look at information all day long . . . and she will eventually learn it. But she does a lot better if you simply