THE WAY WE HUG NOW

- ☐ When I was a kid I remember being pushed to hug my grandparents

- ☐ Visit with Guralnick, hug our spouse

Tara Parker-Pope — the Well for the NY Times columnist — keeps hearing from readers who are anguished about their inability to visit and touch family members. It's particularly painful for grandparents, who often live alone. "So many of them told me that life on indefinite lockdown, without hugs and time with family, is just not worth living," Tara says.

In response, she has written a guide to safer hugging, and it's delightful.

"A brief hug, as long as we stay out of each other's breathing zones, is probably less risky than a long conversation," she told me. But she added that we should still limit our hugs. As one scientist told her, "I would take the Marie Kondo approach — the hug has to spark joy."

Not only do we miss hugs, we need them. Physical affection reduces stress by calming our sympathetic nervous system, which during times of worry releases damaging stress hormones into our bodies. In one series of studies, just holding hands with a loved one reduced the distress of an electric shock.

"Humans have brain pathways that are specifically dedicated to detecting affectionate touch," says Johannes Eichstaedt, a computational social scientist and psychology professor at Stanford University. "Affectionate touch is how our biological systems communicate to one another that we are safe, that we are loved, and that we are not alone."

To learn the safest way to hug during a viral outbreak, I asked Linsey Marr, an aerosol scientist at Virginia Tech and one of the world's leading experts on airborne disease transmission, about the risk of viral exposure during a hug. Based on mathematical models from a Hong Kong study that shows how respiratory viruses travel during close contact, Dr. Marr calculated that the risk of exposure during a brief hug can be surprisingly low — even if you hugged a person who didn't know they were infected and happened to cough.