



JAMES BEELER, BLACK STAR IMAGE

People who participate in a cuddle party must ask permission of everyone before doing anything. Proponents say it's therapeutic, relaxing and fun.

## HOW IT ALL STARTED

Reid Mihalko, 37, came up with the idea for a cuddle party two years ago after throwing message parties for a group of friends made up of massage therapists, nurses and yoga instructors. His other friends were intimidated to join the professionals, so Mihalko decided to have "cuddle parties" to make them more comfortable. Mihalko has worked a number of jobs — he's an actor, bartender, massage therapist, martial artist, self-proclaimed sex educator and relationship counsellor, and now, entrepreneur. He met Marcia Baczynski, 27, at a party who later offered to join forces. Baczynski, also a self-proclaimed sex educator and relationship counsellor, studied public relations and women's issues at the University of Georgia.

To certify cuddle party facilitators, Mihalko and Baczynski hold training sessions in various cities across the U.S. They are also co-authoring a book on how people can have more intimacy in their lives.

# GETTING REALLY CLOSE

*The cuddle party, a gathering where people explore affectionate touch and communication but refrain from sex, is new to Canada. Creators say activities such as touching and kissing, within strict rules, answer basic human needs*

BY SUZANNE MA

One by one, nine women in pyjamas form a "spooning line," snuggling up against each other across the floor. "Do you want to spoon?"

"Sure?"  
"Do you want to be the big spoon or the small spoon?"

I am the last to join in. I lie down curled up on my side, and someone behind me puts her hand on my arm. My back is resting against her stomach.

For the past three hours, I have been spooning, stroking and caressing a group of strangers.

"Is it all right if I do this?" the woman asks, stroking my bare arm.

"Sure," I say.  
That's Rule 3 — You must ask permission and receive a verbal yes before you touch anyone.

She starts stroking my hair, and it feels nice, but I can't relax. My eyes stay wide open.

The "cuddle party" is new to Canada. It came from New York City, and co-creators Reid Mihalko and Marcia Baczynski say it's a way to explore affectionate touch and communication without it becoming sexualized.

"Touch is a basic human need," says Mihalko. "It's like air, water and food."

Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, he says it has become taboo to ask for affection in life. The days of slumber parties, holding hands, long hugs and braiding each other's hair only exist in our childhood memories.

"Just because we've grown up doesn't mean we don't need touch anymore," says Mihalko. "We have that capability as adults, to explore affectionate touch, but we are closed off to it because we're scared of being mislabelled."

Now it seems more and more people are opening up to the idea of cuddling with strangers. Since the first cuddle party was held two years ago in Mihalko's New York City studio apartment, cuddle parties have appeared in Los Angeles, Alabama and now Toronto. For \$20 you can snuggle, nuzzle and cuddle with strangers. Most are co-ed events, but tonight's event is for women only.

Just before 7:30 p.m. they start arriving at the back door of a bookstore nestled in the Annex, a trendy downtown neighbourhood near the University of Toronto. Some of us are in relationships, some are single; a few women tell the group they are lesbians; the youngest is no older than 20, the eldest is over 40.

Most arrive in their street clothes, change into pyjamas — flannel, draw string pants, tank tops and loose tees — and put on name tags. Then, we're all invited to take a seat on the layers of patterned blankets and giant colourful pillows for the welcome circle.

Cecilia Moorcroft, 33, is the first Canadian to be a certified cuddle party facilitator. That means she's taken a course and has been personally approved by Mihalko and Baczynski to host and supervise parties in Toronto.

"Last year, I started feeling really lonely," says

Moorcroft. "My body was lonely for affection." After seeing a report on television about the cuddle party, Moorcroft and a friend flew down to New York City a month later to experience it themselves.

As soon as she started cuddling, Moorcroft was hooked.

"My body sighed with relief," she says. "After three hours, I was completely blissed out. I don't think I've ever felt that relaxed."

Moorcroft goes over the 16 cuddle party rules.

Everybody must ask permission of everyone else before doing anything. No sex or simulation of it. Kissing is as far as things can go. Pyjamas stay on, nobody can take their clothes off.

"The cuddle party is creating a safe environment. You're being in a space where you have control and choice over what you want to do."

For a role-playing activity, I have to turn to the woman next to me and ask "May I kiss you?"

She replies "No." There, just like that, we've learned to establish boundaries.

Rules 4 and 5 — If you're a yes, say yes. If you're a no, say no. If you're a maybe, say no.

And you are encouraged to change your mind if you want.

Moorcroft skips over the rules about erections, since we are all women. Someone asks anyway. We are told that physical touch can be arousing and while things may "come up" it's OK, as long as no one acts on it. All of us can't help but giggle.

By the time Moorcroft is finished with the 16th rule, most of the women seem eager to start. It's time for some "freestyle cuddling."

The shyer (or hungrier) participants dart to the snack table and stand there nibbling on crackers or carrot sticks. Others jump right into a spooning line. A few women go off on their own in a corner, and their bodies seem to fall into place with ease — heads rest on stomachs, arms are draped over legs, and hands move in slow motion to rub feet and massage backs. There's nonstop chatter and giggling coming from all corners of the room.

In June, Isabella D'Allessandro, 23, helped

Moorcroft organize a cuddle party in Guelph. D'Allessandro is in a long-distance relationship and says the cuddle party gave her the chance to have the nonsexual, affectionate touch she was yearning for.

"Touching is a fundamental way I communicate with people. I think it's extremely healthy to open up that communication with those outside of my close relationships."

Her boyfriend doesn't feel the same way. "He has a great imagination. But we talked about the cuddle parties extensively and he understands that it is fundamental thing for my growth. In the end, I think it has strengthened our relationship."

Rule 8 — If you're in a relationship, communicate and set boundaries and agreements before you go to the cuddle party.

Mihalko says the cuddle party can nurture relationships by encouraging communication and trust. But, he admits, most participants are single and treat the cuddle party as a social event.

"The bar scene is the No. 1 place people go to meet others, but then you have alcohol and loud music and people have their game faces on. There is so much BS in the air," he says.

"When you're at a cuddle party, you let your guard down and you can meet people who are being themselves. That's what's really attractive for people who are single."

Dr. Wanda Crouse, a psychiatrist in Victoria, B.C., sees it as something fun to do with friends.

"If there was a group of friends who decided to (have a cuddle party), then there's some foundation for basis of friendship and warmth," she says. "I think, with most people, that would be more effective in creating the closeness and intimacy we need."

Crouse warns that cuddle parties shouldn't be mistaken for relationship therapy. "It is not a cure-all. In general, physical, affectionate contact is positive but you can get closeness and intimacy in many other ways."

The therapy, Crouse says, may lie in the silliness of it all.

"I do see (real) benefits in the use of humour and laughter. It's therapeutic because it is a chance for people to be goofy and to spend an evening laughing and relaxing and just having fun."

All cuddle parties end off with everyone clamoring into a "puppy pile."

To get the full effect, I volunteer to be on the bottom. I find myself pressed up against three other women as we lie under layers of pillows and blankets. Six other women are stretched out on top of us. Instead of feeling relaxed, I feel myself short of breath. I think I've had enough cuddling for the night. As everyone packs up and says goodbye, I escape out the back door and into the warm, lively air of the Annex at night.

This is when my body, finally, sighs with relief.

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The cuddle party is said to allow intimacy in a nonsexual way.

## THE RULES

1. Pyjamas stay on the whole time.
2. No sex. (Yep, you read that right.)
3. A) Kissing and nuzzling, as well as other forms of touch, are allowed, but you must ask permission and receive a verbal yes before you touch anyone. B) You don't have to cuddle anyone at a cuddle party, ever.
4. If you're a yes, say yes. If you're a no, say no.
5. If you're a maybe, say no.
6. You are encouraged to change your mind from a yes to a no, no to a yes anytime you want.
7. Always say thank you and practise good cuddle manners.
8. If you're in a relationship, communicate and set your boundaries and agreements before you go to the cuddle party. Don't renegotiate those agreements and boundaries during the cuddle party. (Trust us on this one.)
9. Get your Cuddle Lifeguard On Duty or Cuddle Caddy if there's a concern, problem, or question or should you feel unsafe or need assistance with anything during the cuddle party.
10. Crying and giggling are both welcomed and encouraged.
11. Please be respectful of other people's privacy when sharing with the outside world about cuddle parties and do not gossip.
12. Arrive on time.
13. Be hygienically savvy.
14. Keep the cuddle space tidy and pick up after yourself.

## LOOKING FOR A CUDDLE PARTY NEAR YOU?

Contact Cecilia Moorcroft at [cuddlepartytoronto@yahoo.ca](mailto:cuddlepartytoronto@yahoo.ca). For more information on cuddle parties in general, visit [www.cuddleparty.com](http://www.cuddleparty.com).