

The Cuddlist
The Queer Public Podcast
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Rachel: Perfect. And so let me know if you like touches like that, or if you like hair stuff. You can ask for whatever you want and the worst thing that can happen is I say "oh that's a no from me" but a No doesn't mean a no for everything, it's like well this is what I can do.

Michelle: NO, the arm touching is fine.

Rachel: ok, Perfect.

Rachel: How you feeling?

Michelle: Feeling Good, feeling relaxed

Rachel: Okay, that's good

You're listening to Queer Public.

Queer public is a podcast about real life queer life. Each episode we ask big questions about queer identity, politics and our queer culture.

We're navigating complicated power dynamics all the time -- Socially Physically and emotionally.

But We've always had to work harder at open communication. We have to talk about what we like and don't like, what makes us feel good and what doesn't, because there's no dominant script for queer intimacy.

Today we're asking, how can we have empowering, consensual intimate encounters?

What if I told you I met someone who can teach us how to level the playing field so we can feel good in our bodies and in our relationships.

Before we begin a quick word; this story acknowledges the existence and reality of non-consensual experiences and sexual assault. Take care of yourselves.

Rachel: I came to Philly to get my degree in Human Sexuality which has led me in a lot of directions and one of them is becoming a professional Cuddler.

Meet Rachel. Rachel is uses she/her pronouns, self identifies as jewish and is a queer sexologist.

Rachel's been a practicing Cuddlist which means that she cuddles with people for money. Clients find her profile on Cuddlist.com, a website that connects potential clients to Cuddlists, or people certified to cuddle. For about \$80 a session, clients practice some form of physical vulnerability with Rachel. Because everybody has different needs, cuddling can mean lot of different things. For these purposes, we're talking about laying or sitting close and snug, and touch that provides comfort and nurturing affection. Sometimes that means she holds a client while they process their week with her. Sometimes she plays with their hair. Sometimes she just lies down next to a person.

Rachel: I am whatever spoon the other person needs me to be. I can also ask to be whatever spoon I want and it's different every time.

Rachel: I am always checking in and that's, that's actually the new thing for people, is the checking in. A lot of them don't experience that anywhere else. And it's so vital right? To check in with the other person is feeling and what they want.

Erin: Rachel lives up 4 flights of stairs in a giant victorian home in west philadelphia. She calls it the attic. It's a cozy room with an office nook, a reading chair, a few plants. And her room is also where she conducts sessions.

Erin: So this is the bed.

Rachel Yeah. This is like where I see clients.

This is my bed that I sleep in at night and that becomes also the cuddle bed basically. And so I just take like clean blankets and put them over on the bed that I use as a sleeping bed. it's just sort of a barrier boundary. Something that makes that depersonalizes in my own head.

Rachel's clients come to her for lots of different reasons. Sometimes it's to learn how to be more comfortable around other people, sometimes it's for nurturing affection. And it's not just people who feel touch starved. There are real therapeutic benefits to cuddling, but mostly people come to Rachel for the emotional labor - the open ear - she gives to clients in cuddle sessions.

Rachel: I think some people see it as a kind of therapy that they like to go to every week and then other people sort of see it as like sort of maybe getting a massage, just like a treat they like to give themselves every so often.

Erin: So the science behind cuddling. Physical touch and pressure releases oxytocin - which is actually nicknamed "the cuddle hormone". Our brains release oxytocin which creates feelings of trust and bonding -- basically human connection. Cuddling also reduces the body's stress hormone, a hormone called Cortisol. So I totally get how this could be therapeutic.

Rachel always knew she loved receiving touch but it's a little more complicated for her.

Rachel: So I'm asexual. I have been in so many situations where I have just like gone along with physical intimacy sexual intimacy because I thought that I was supposed to or that there was something wrong with me for not wanting it. So I know what it feels to not want to do something and not necessarily be forced to do it but to feel like there's something wrong with you if you're not forcing yourself to want to do it. I don't know if that makes sense.

Rachel: I always understood asexuality to be just the complete lack of any sort of desire for sexuality at all which is just really not the case. Just like everything else it exists on the spectrum. And so I knew that I always had like this high libido and felt sort of like sexual in some ways but I was never attracted to anybody. So I experience romantic attraction but I don't feel sexually attracted to anybody. So even those that I've dated in the past some of them I just never feel like I could be sexual with them. And I loved them so much romantically and was totally in love with them. But I just never felt sexually attracted to them.

So just understanding that I was queer before I knew why and never having any sort of like reason why all of it resonated so much. But I do now.

Erin: Rachel Learned about professional cuddling from a demonstration at a sexuality conference.

Rachel: I saw it and it just sort of hit me. It really resonated.

I thought "Oh that is so cool, what an important service" I was immediately interested and fascinated by it and I went to talk to one of the CEOs of Cuddlist and I talked to him for a really long time and I got to like tell him a little bit about my story.

And he then told me a story of an old man who had reached out to a Cuddlist because he was asexual but he was always afraid of disappointing a partner or somebody by not being able to follow through sexually. So he had gone so long in his life like he was maybe in his 80s and was just so excited to be able to have somebody to cuddle with because that's all he'd ever really wanted was just the cuddling.

I wanted to be able to cuddle with people who felt that that's all they really wanted and they felt sort of lost in the world because, because it was all they wanted. And I understand that feeling completely so. And that's the kind of affection that I have to give.

And so once Adam told me that then it really hit home and I was like OK this is something I want to pursue I'm going to try to do this.

Erin: As you've gathered by now, cuddling is intimate. It's a real act of vulnerability, for both Rachel and her clients. I mean that's her service, that's what she provides: Physical and emotional intimacy. There is a lot of trust that goes into the practice itself. And in order to trust the person she's willing to work with, she's developed a vetting process.

Rachel: So there is no cuddle session that exists first session or review session that is without the practice of consent. It is like inherent to the cuddle practice.

Rachel: So number one for vetting is knowing what I am okay with and what I am not okay with. So the first step in my vetting is emailing the person. If they don't have a valid e-mail address or don't give me an email address then they're not going to see me. I like to keep it very formal. So if somebody calls me honey, baby, any of that stuff. That's a big red flag for me. Huge red flag. Because I can tell so much about the person from the way they respond to meet their email. The next step is a phone call. I do a 15 minute phone call with each potential client and I talk to them and I ask them lots of questions and I want to know how they found out about cuddling. I want to know a bit about their background. I want to know what they're hoping to get out of it. What they heard about it and I just talked to them. And so from there on you can also get a pretty good feel of what people are looking for.

I was really disheartened actually my very first request was somebody that I had to turn away because he'd previously been inappropriate with another cuddler. And so that did not help my anxiety regarding sort of like the process. But I honestly felt a bit proud of myself because even not knowing or even before I knew that he had been sort of questionable I myself came to that conclusion which is why he looked

his name up. And so I was really proud of myself and so that sort of encouraged me to really trust my process. So I was like wait I did catch that. So that's really good.

Erin: Eventually, Rachel booked her first client. At the time of this interview Rachel was trying to protect the identity of her first client by using they/them pronouns, not to identify the clients gender.

Rachel: But then my very first client that I saw was very exciting for me because they were very forthcoming in their answers.

Bob: I really wanted to make a change for the better but I didn't really know where to begin

My name is Bob, I live in Abington actually.

Bob: A couple of things going on. My teenage son had committed suicide about a year and a half prior. And I was certainly still floundering from that and you know I've gone through had gone through some counseling and still am but I'm still pretty much adrift due to that. And I was also adrift for a couple of other things going on in my life. I wasn't really that thrilled with my my my career was going. And I really didn't have the energy to do much about it because of you know I was really still feeling pretty down about you know to my son.

You know for a while its normal after a death like that one day at a time But it seemed to me to be lasting a bit too long and it wasn't pulling out of it.

Rachel: I was really excited but I was also really scared. I was really nervous, I was like what if I am not enough for this client. What if I can't give them some sort of comfort, what if I say the wrong thing. I remember it was just kind of cloudy that day and I was nervously standing on my porch waiting for them to walk up and then I saw them and they had a backpack on and they looked not childlike but childlike and all of a sudden I was just like oh yeah this is going to be fine.

Bob: you intrigued me. And I respected you a lot just for your willingness to do this.

Rachel: And I let them know that it was my first session also and that we were embarking on this thing together and they told me I think with even like 10 minutes of the first session that they were amazed at how comfortable they were already. And I was just like OK that's why I do this. OKay I got this.

Bob: No we kind of jumped right in.

Bob: To be honest with you we just went for a full body cuddle you know right off the bat and you know at first I was like thinking well she's going to tell me exactly what she wants me to do and you know And we ease into it that way but it really wasn't that way. It was just like oh what are we doing. OK let's just do this and we did. Nice poned hug on the bed and that was just wonderful.

Rachel: It was really really lovely. And all boundaries were totally respected. It was it was just a really special thing.

Bob: It just felt great to have someone really just you know devote their entire attention to me for that period of time. You know there was no distractions. It was just the two of us you know we were obvious there was definitely awkward because we didn't know each other at all and we're just going to know each other. But you know it still felt like we were totally you know at least present with each other. And you know that's not something that happens that often between two people any kind of situation. So it was it was just really nice you know nice time and nice feeling.

Bob: Yeah but it was definitely the right thing for me. it's hard to quantify things but I mean I definitely do feel a little less anxiety about just life in general. It's not like it's been a big you know change or you know more gradual and a more gradual type thing but I definitely do feel a little bit more comfortable with myself. I was definitely lacking touch in my life and it filled a need for that.

Bob: Mainly it's just self acceptance, that's the biggest benefit to me, long term.

Bob: It definitely is a real, just skyrockets my self esteem.

Rachel: That's so awesome. Yes!

Bob: It does. It really does.

I think cuddling helps me more than other forms of therapy. I've gone through grief counseling and before my son died I've gone to see a psychologist at various points for mild depression. But I've always, you know. It's hard for me to not think of them sitting there judging me in some way. And it's also like a one way street. You know, you're laying, I'm laying my life out for them and they're just being super professional and you know, you don't really get a sense of who they are outside of the uh, session, in their life. And I really appreciate how you share things about your life and it just makes me feel Mmm I am not expressing this well but it's important..

Rachel: No, you're doing great.

Bob: Like it's a two way street. You know? And it really, that really helps. It really makes it all feel so much worthwhile. [Pause]

Rachel: That's awesome. That like, it makes me want to cry, but I'm not gonna cry.

Erin: Rachel and Bob are bonded. They do have something special. It's special because he is such a good fit for her practice. And her practice is something she gives a lot of thought to. But there have been instances where clients haven't been a good fit for professional cuddling.

Rachel: I'd had a session and it had gone wonderfully.

It was totally everything it needed to be and then it happened within like the last 10 minutes. This person tried to kiss my face and I immediately said no that's not OK I told you at the beginning of the session. No kissing. Absolutely none. And they said to me oh sorry I must've been talking to close to your face. Which is a very bold faced lie. And I said there's no need to have any excuse you know. Now you knew before just if that happens again. It's done and it didn't happen again. But I know that they felt bad about crossing that boundary and I don't know if that's why they left me a really big tip but that felt bad also because there's no amount of money that makes that okay and it's just somebody that I will not see again.

Rachel: it's disappointing and it can really wear on you.

Erin: In these instances of boundary crossing, sometimes there is an indication that something else is going on.

Rachel: Sometimes it's a slip up because there actually is a lot of unlearning for men especially that they have to do because there's sort of this idea that all intimate encounters lead to sex and so now they're in this first encounter that is intimate in that way and it doesn't. And so they slip up and they feel lost and they don't know what to do with themselves. Like there is actually some social programming that has to be unlearned. So depending on what I'm feeling in that moment if I feel like that's sort of what's going on I'm more patient with it and I ask them what's happening.

And so from there I'll negotiate whether or not I'll see them again.

Erin: The risk that people experience on dates, or walking home at night. That's Rachel's work. Rachel sees clients in her own home. In her own bed!

Rachel: I'll be like I am inviting like Danger into my own home. I have a hammer under my bed, that I always keep there, like I consciously keep it there because you never know. But I also keep it there for every night, because you never know.

I don't know that there are male cuddlists who keep hammers under their beds just in everyday life. Male cuddlists like to have some sort of proof that they are doing

exactly what they say they are doing and that they are not crossing boundaries. I think they fear that.

I think their fear is completely different than my fear. I don't know that it's a fear of losing their life, which I fear. And that's the biggest difference.

Erin: So far Rachel has only had male clients. But she's heard from women and in these interactions Rachel's noticed a trend.

Rachel: I've never had a woman follow through. I want so badly to work with women, especially women who have survived trauma, where intimacy has been used and abused and sort of force over them and to help them be in a safe and intimate situation

I think that's the work I feel the closest to, and it's not the work that I do the most of and there is a certain amount of passion I feel when I am confronted with a client who is trying to overcome trauma. Especially women clients, femme clients who are just trying to feel safe in their body and who they are—and learn how to have autonomy. Just basic autonomy with another person there. I think they've been thrown into a world in which they can not feel like they have complete autonomy unless they are alone and that sucks and it's not okay. So so much of that can be helped by learning how to communicate boundaries and by saying no, and communicating what you want.

Rachel: If you can help people feel comfortable saying no, while also helping the other half of the population how to hear no and respect it. I think, that's just so essential. Basic tools that nobody is taught.

I know that every woman that has ever tried to book a session has canceled on me. And I think it is due to fear. Women are afraid that I'm not who I say I am that you know it's unsafe somehow. I think that there's also fear of intimacy I think women fear intimacy differently than men do—I think men are afraid that people will find out that they are paying to have intimate connections and that's shameful for them. And I think a lot of women feel shame about the actual intimacy. I think that it's I think it's frightening for them.

I think that women are less likely to come to somebody like me for help, or at least that's what I've experienced.

Erin: So we set out to find someone outside her clientele demographic. Rachel did communicate with one woman for a number of weeks but each and every time they'd book a session, the woman would cancel. We were

both feeling pretty discouraged when something amazing happened. And on Valentines day...

[Meet/Greet]

Rachel: Hi Michelle

Michelle: hi

Rachel - sorry, how are you

Michelle - Pretty Good

Rachel - can I give you a hug

Michelle - of course

Erin: Rachel met someone who was willing to try a cuddle session and let her record it.

Rachel - Awesome, hello welcome. Did you have an easy time finding it? Okay good? You're a west Phillier right, okay good. Perfect it's all the way up the stairs, we are going to go straight top. And also I feel like we can just say out loud that we're being recorded and it's weird.

Michelle; Yeah.

Rachel: So it's you and me together in this. It's weird for everybody, except maybe Erin

Erin: Michelle is queer, latinx and almost 30 years old. A few years ago, Michelle was diagnosed with PTSD. She lives with a lot of symptoms that stem from her trauma. She suffers from anxiety and depression, and she finds it hard to be comfortable with herself.

[Session tape]

Rachel: I also like to ask people to look back to when they were little if there were touches from a friend or a parent that they remember having and always being good. Like I remember laying on my bed with mom face down and she would just play with my back at night and I wish she would just do that forever. I think if I were to go to a cuddler I would ask them to do that. Or a head in a lap, or even hair brushing. I can always say I can brush your hair, if you want to bring me your brush I can brush your hair. Things like that, anything that feels nurturing to you. There's also like tons of other things that I do with other people, like I do spoon with people. It's really whatever you're comfortable with.

Michelle: Yeah, Honestly I am trying to think back to something similar that my mother did and I can't

Rachel: You can't think about it. And that's actually pretty common. Especially men, they're like "my mom did not cuddle me" and so I do what I can remember of my mom or

Rachel: There is a really good hold that I like that I think is good first off. So we're just like laying next to each other and you just put your head on my shoulder and I can just hold you like that.

Michelle: okay.

Rachel: Or...

Michelle: No, yeah.

Rachel: we can just go with the flow, even just laying next to me to begin with, all that is totally fine.

Rachel: Perfect. And so let me know if you like touches like that, or if you like hair stuff. You can ask for whatever you want and the worst thing that can happen is I say "oh that's a no from me" but a No doesn't mean a no for everything, it's like well this is what I can do.

Michelle: Arm touching is fine.

Rachel: Perfect. Yeah, it's always, it's always interesting, I always think about my first experience cuddling and mine was at a party actually so it was a room full of strangers and we were all cuddling, and none of them were professional cuddlers, it was a really wild thing

Rachel: Can I shift a little. Can I... hug you more?

Michelle; That's fine. It's weird because this interaction is something you would do with someone you're seeing or just

Rachel: yeah

Rachel: How you feeling?

Michelle: Feeling good, feeling relaxed.

Erin: Over the course of the session, Rachel and Michelle talk about everything - Most of the time it just sounds like two friends getting to know each other. But there is something else there. There is this extra level of support, and i think it's a part of Rachel's gift. It's the support she can provide while also giving physical comfort. She's affirming. For example, Michelle confided that because she's been working two jobs, she has been able to scrape together some savings.

Michelle: It's nice you know to have money, and a savings account --

Rachel: Ohhh that's amazing! You know, savings accounts are amazing.

Like you have one, I'm -- I just met you and I am so proud of you. [both laugh]
That is like, so hard.

Michelle: There's not a lot in there but it's something.

Rachel: Yeah, no that's... you have one. No, that's something.

Michelle: Yeah.

Rachel. Totally.

Rachel: How are you feeling? You feeling comfortable

Michelle: Oh yeah I am feeling fine.

Rachel: Just let me know if there is a shift you want to make or...

Do you want me to braid your hair or something

[both laugh] Anything really goes, you can ask for anything.

Michelle: this is fine.

Erin: Afterwards I sat down with Michelle to talk about her experience of the session.

Michelle: I walked away from this experience not realizing i would feel this comfortable with a random stranger. It was timed just like a therapy session and I but I also was comforted and basically told that it was going to be okay. That element of touching, really. It's like relaxing, but you also happen to be in that state of mind where you have to, you know, get cuddled by a stranger. It's just like, having a safe space, having a safe person there with you, who's going to actually give you the attention you deserve and help you process. It's wonderful. I am trying to remember the last time that someone did that for me and it's hard to say. It's like very frustrating to say that it's been a really long time, you know? Yeah, I left with that natural high, I was in such a good mood....

She's doing "God's work"

Erin: She's doing "God's Work" [both laugh].

Rachel: it's not a one sided practice at all.

I think that cuddling is always going both ways. And it's really a practice in togetherness which sounds corny but it really teaches people how to communicate and be together in this intimate situation.

Erin: Since recording these interviews, Rachel has stopped seeing cis male clients. Ultimately, it wore her down, vetting men. She took down her profile on the cuddlist platform. Now, Rachel will only work with women and queers and the trans community. So, if you live in the Philadelphia area-and think you could benefit from a cuddle session, you can email Rachel. I'll put her email address in the show notes.

And so I just have to remember that like this is very helpful what I'm doing and like that I shouldn't get discouraged just because I'm not seeing any sort of like immediate change in the world because like that's nothing nothing is immediate especially when It's always been this way. I am this and this is my thing. And I have to be it has to be enough. I think.

Erin: A special thank you to Rachel's clients: Bob and Michelle, and to Rachel. Rachel - You're my friggin hero.

This episode was edited and produced by me, Erin McGregor, and Ariana Martinez. Editorial assistance from Angela Sarakan, and Laura Starecheski. Scripting help from Carly Bickle and Ariana Martinez. Music supervision by Homoground's very own Lynn Casper. We featured music from Cuddle Formation, and Chris Zabriskie, and Kai Engle. Special thanks to Air Media and their Mentorship program. I got to work with Laura Starecheski - Thanks to Laura for listening to very early drafts of this episode and providing essential feedback.

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Teaser:

Coral: If you have a vision of what you want, and with the help of somebody that has the skills, you can accomplish something that is "You." If a haircut represents you and how you feel inside, then it is a good haircut.

I'm your host, Erin McGregor. Thanks for listening.

Erin: can you read the disclaimer.

Rachel: Yeah. The need for cuddling does not discriminate on the basis of race creed color ethnicity national origin religion sex sexual orientation gender expression age height weight physical or mental ability veterans status military obligations and marital status and neither does Rachel. Oh so corny. I love it though and I'll never change it.