

Under Pressure

Liz Krieger gets experts to weigh in on the heavy blanket trend.

I'VE ALWAYS LIKED going to the dentist, especially when the assistant drapes that leaden X-ray apron over me. The lovely heaviness seems to tamp down my anxious energy; I always wish I could stay tucked in that way for the rest of the day. So I was thrilled when Facebook introduced me to a comforter stuffed with heavy pellets to make it press down on the body (almost like it's cuddling you back). But before I shelled out \$150 for something that promised to do what my cats could presumably handle for free, I had to learn more.

I was optimistic that this wasn't just another blanket-with-benefits fad, like Slankets or Snuggies. Manufacturers suggest that weighted wraps can do more than help you cozy down. The Gravity blanket (funded with \$4.7 million on Kickstarter), for instance, is designed to remedy "stress and anxiety"; others can supposedly make snugglers "feel relaxed and calm" and help with sleep disorders.

There may be some scientific truth to these claims. That peaceful feeling I get from a lead apron is something occupational therapists have recognized since the '70s: Called deep pressure (DP) touch, it's a soothing technique that involves firm pressing, stroking, hugging, swaddling, or squeezing. During DP stimulation, "sensory receptors in your skin and body that are responsive to pressure send signals to the brain that activate the parasympathetic nervous system—the system that tends to make you feel calm," says Teresa May-Benson, executive director of the Spiral Foundation, a nonprofit in Newton, Massachusetts, that focuses on sensory processing disorders. As a result, you feel less stressed, notes Tina Champagne, an occupational therapist in Northampton, Massachusetts. Champagne says that for people who are overstimulated by sensory cues and feel constantly assaulted, DP can lessen distress.

Outside OT, weighted blankets are used in psychiatric units and nursing homes to provide a form of DP that lowers patients' anxiety. The blankets started catching on with ordinary couch potatoes a few years ago and can



now be found online and at Bed Bath & Beyond.

In a small 2008 study coauthored by Champagne, adults rested under 30-pound blankets for five minutes. When asked whether they felt more relaxed, 78 percent said yes. And when Swedish researchers had 31 people with chronic insomnia snooze with a chain-weighted blanket, more than half saw improvements: The 21 people who liked the blanket slept longer or fell back to sleep faster after waking up in the middle of the night.

Buoyed by this information, I ordered my own 12-pound blanket (May-Benson recommends starting with one that's 5 to 10 percent of your body weight). When it arrived, I dragged it to my desk and heaved it over my legs. It was worth the effort: My lower body was ensconced in a comfy cotton squeeze. If I got more done that day, I like to think it was because my blanket kept me calm and focused—and not just because it pinned me to my chair.

Weighted blankets shouldn't be used by children without adult supervision, so I warned mine that it wasn't a toy. In bed, I struggled to get the positioning right; when the blanket was too high, I felt trapped and sweaty. But when I pushed it down to my thighs, the weight soothed my sore legs as well as the rest of me, and I dropped right off to sleep.

Could I have seen the same effect with a dense duvet? Maybe. May-Benson says that for some people, sleeping under a heavy blanket can provide some level of DP. But for me, an ordinary afghan now feels as insubstantial as a silk scarf. I've been self-swaddling while I work, chill out, and sleep. To me, this calm-inducing coverlet is worth its weight in gold.



PRESSURE POINTS

Deep pressure received buzz in the 1990s after the animal scientist and autism activist Temple Grandin, PhD, published research on a "squeeze machine" with padded panels to comfortably "hug" those with sensory issues (inspired by chutes used to calm livestock). In the 1992 study of 40 college students, Grandin determined that more than half of them found her machine at least somewhat relaxing.