Labeling Emotions is New Way to Overcome Fear and Stress

By Drishya Nair

It is believed that speaking out about the things that scare or cause anxiety in us, always helps us deal with it. But does it really work?

According to a new study by UCLA psychology labeling your emotions at the precise moment you are confronting what you fear could actually be helpful.

For the study, the researchers asked 88 people who feared spiders to approach a large, live tarantula in an open container outdoors. They were asked to get as close to the spider and also touch it if they could.

Afterwards, the subjects were divided into four groups and seated in front of another tarantula in a container in an indoors.

In the first group, the participants were asked to describe their feelings and emotions towards the tarantula. They could say for example, "I'm anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider," Medical Xpress reported.

"This is unique because it differs from typical procedures in which the goal is to have people think differently about the experience-to change their emotional experience or change the way they think about it so that it doesn't make them anxious," said Michelle Craske, a professor of psychology at UCLA and the senior author of the study. "Here, there was no attempt to change their experience, just to state what they were experiencing."
In the second group, participants could use more neutral terms, which did not actually let them express their fear or disgust. They could only say things that could pacify their threat. For example, "That little spider can't hurt me; I'm not afraid of it," they could say.

"This is the usual approach for helping individuals to confront the things they fear," Craske said.

In the third group, participants could say something irrelevant to the spider or the situation they were in. The fourth group was not supposed to say anything, but was simply exposed to the spider.

After a week, all the participants were tested again in the same outdoor setting where they were supposed to get closer to the spider and try touching it.

When the researchers measured how close the participants could get to the spider, they found that the first group did much better than the other three groups.

Also, while measuring the participants' distress, physiological responses, their hands' sweating, the first group was again found to be doing better. They could not only get closer, their hands also sweated significantly lesser than other groups.

"They got closer and they were less emotionally aroused," Craske said. "The differences were significant. The results are even more significant given the limited amount of time involved. With a fuller treatment, the effects may be even larger. Exposure is potent," she added. "It's surprising that this minimal intervention action had a significant effect over exposure alone."

So how did the first group do better than the others?

"If you're having less of a threat response, which is indicated by less sweat, that would allow you to get closer; you have less of a fear response," study co-author Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA professor of psychology and of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences was quoted as saying by Medical Xpress.

"When spider-phobics say, 'I'm terrified of that nasty spider,' they're not learning something new; that's exactly what they were feeling-but now instead of just feeling it, they're saying it. For some reason that we don't fully understand, that transition is enough to make a difference."

Also, when the scientists looked into the words used by the participants, they found that more negative words helped them do better.

"Doing more affect labeling seemed to be better," Lieberman said.

"That is so different from how we normally think about exposure therapy, where you try to get the person to think differently, to think it's not so bad," Craske said. "What we did here was to simply encourage individuals to state the negative."

"We've published a series of studies where we asked people, 'Which do you think would make you feel worse: looking at a disturbing image or looking at that disturbing image and choosing a negative emotional word to describe it,'" Lieberman said. "Almost everyone said it would be worse to have to look at that image and focus on the negative by picking a negative word. People think that makes our negative emotions more intense. Well, that is exactly what we asked people to do here. In fact, it's a little better to have people label their emotions-multiple studies now show this. Our intuitions here are wrong."

This is the first study to have demonstrated the benefits for affect labeling of fear and anxiety in a real-world setting, Craske and Lieberman said.
"The implication," Craske said, "is to encourage patients, as they do their exposure to whatever they are fearful of, to label the emotional responses they are experiencing and label the characteristics of the stimuli-to verbalize their feelings. That lets people experience the very things they are afraid and say, 'I feel scared and I'm here.' They're not trying to push it away and say it's not so bad. Be in the moment and allow yourself to experience whatever you're experiencing."

The researchers of this study are currently conducting more research to find out how this can be therapeutic to traumatized people like rape victims. This could also be beneficial for soldiers returning from War.

"I'm far more optimistic than I was before this study," Lieberman said. "I'm a believer that this approach can have real benefits for people.

"There is a region in the brain, the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, that seems to be involved in labeling our feelings and our emotional reactions, and it is also associated with regulating our emotional responses," he said. "Why those two go together is still a bit of a mystery. This brain region that is involved in simply stating how we are feeling seems to mute our emotional responses, at least under certain circumstances." "There's a trend in psychology of acceptance-based approaches-honestly label your feelings. This study has that flavor to it," Craske said.

The results are published in the online edition of the journal Psychological Science and will appear in an upcoming print edition.