The secret of beating fear? Just talk about your emotions, say researchers

By Mark Prigg

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Simply describing your feelings at stressful times can make you less anxious, researchers have claimed.

UCLA research into people who were terrified of spiders found that by simply talking about their fear, they were able to deal with it - and even touch a tarantula.

The psychologists asked 88 people with a fear of spiders to approach a large, live tarantula in an open container outdoors.

The participants were told to walk closer and closer to the spider and eventually touch it if they could.

The subjects were then divided into four groups and sat in front of another tarantula in a container in an indoor setting.

In the first group, the subjects were asked to describe the emotions they were experiencing and to label their reactions to the tarantula — saying, for example, 'I'm anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider.'
'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 a second group, the subjects used more neutral terms that did not convey their fear or disgust and were aimed at making the experience seem less threatening.

They might say, for example, 'That little spider can't hurt me; I'm not afraid of it.'

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

In a third group, the subjects said something irrelevant to the experience, and in a fourth group, the subjects did not say anything — they were simply exposed to the spider.

'All the participants were re-tested in the outdoor setting one week later and were again asked to get closer and closer to the tarantula and potentially touch it with a finger.

The researchers measured how close subjects could get to the spider, how distressed they were and what their physiological responses were, focusing in particular on how much the subjects' hands sweated, which is a good measure of fear, Craske said.

The researchers found that the first group did far better than the other three.

These people were able to get closer to the tarantula — much closer than those in the third group and somewhat closer than those in the other two groups — and their hands were sweating significantly less than the participants in all of the other groups.

The results are published in the online edition of the journal Psychological Science and will appear in an upcoming print edition.
Facing your fears: Participants found that by talking about their emotions and describing them as they approached a tarantula, they were able to cope better with their fear of spiders.

’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.’

’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,’ said study co-author Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA professor of psychology and of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences.

’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.’

The scientists also analyzed the words the subjects used.

’Those who used a larger number of negative words did better, in terms of both how close they were willing to get to the tarantula and their skin-sweat response.
'In other words, describing the tarantula as terrifying actually proved beneficial in ultimately reducing the fear of it.'