"That Spider's Ugly": Being Negative Helps People Overcome Phobias

Describing fear in a negative way can lower anxiety and improve response to phobias, a new study says.

Researchers from University of California, Los Angeles recruited some 88 people for the study. All participants were afraid of spiders.

Researchers asked participants to approach a tarantula and touch it if they can. The participants were then divided into four groups. All the participants were made to sit in front of a tarantula in a container.

Participants in the first group were asked to describe their fear about the spider like "I'm anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider." The second group was asked to describe the fear in more neutral terms like "That little spider can't hurt me; I'm not afraid of it." The third group was asked to describe about some other irrelevant topic while the fourth group wasn't asked to talk about the spider, rather they were asked to touch it.

Researchers found that the first group did better than the rest of the groups in approaching the spider after a few sessions.

"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," said study Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA professor of psychology and of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, co-author in a press release.
Researchers also found that people who used more negative words to describe their feeling were far better in facing their fear than people who used neutral or positive words.

"Be in the moment and allow yourself to experience whatever you’re experiencing,” said Michelle Craske, a professor of psychology at UCLA and the senior author of the study.

In a similar research article, researchers had said that putting feelings in words (affect labelling) increases activity in right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (RVLPFC) that further decreases activity in amygdala, a region of brain associated with fear and aggression.

The present study was published in the journal Psychological Science.