Talk about your fear while you do the thing you fear most, and according to new research, you may be able to overcome your phobia.

Psychologists at UCLA found that people describing their feelings at the moment they confront their fears has a comforting effect. They asked 88 people with a fear of spiders to approach an open cage containing a big, hairy, live tarantula. They told the participants to touch the spider, if they could muster the courage.

Before forcing their subjects to confront the spider, however, the researchers divided them into four groups. In one group, the scientists instructed the subjects to talk about their feelings. For example, one arachnophobic participant said, “I’m anxious and frightened by that ugly, terrifying spider.”

In the second group, they asked the participants to talk about the spider more neutrally, which is the usual approach for helping people overcome their phobias. Instead of conveying their feelings of fear or disgust, for example, participants said things like “That little spider can’t hurt me. I’m not afraid of it.”

Finally, in the third group the subjects talked about random topics that had nothing to do with spiders, while people in the fourth group didn’t say anything at all.

For all the participants, the researchers measured how close they got to the tarantula, how distressed they were and whether they suffered from physiological markers of fear, such as sweaty palms.

The feelings-oriented group fared far better than the other fearful participants. They got closer to the spider and sweated less than the other group members.

The researchers refer to this method as “affect labeling.” Within the first group, the researchers also found, those who used the greatest number of negative words to describe their terror performed better in terms of getting closer to the tarantula and not sweating as much. Describing how horrified they were ultimately reduced their fear, though the researchers still don’t understand why this is so. They suspect a region of the brain called the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex has something to do with labeling fears and producing...
an emotional reaction, but figuring out how those two responses work together to reduce fear will require more studies.

For now, the researchers are hopeful that their new method might help people who have suffered traumatic experiences or who are plagued by phobias to confront and overcome their fears.

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