According to a study published by a team of psychologists, telling a spider you are frightened of its ugly and terrifying self is the path to setting yourself free from a fear of arachnids.

Methods of modifying human behaviour when it comes to battling fear range from shaping that behaviour through positive reinforcement or acclimatising an individual to a feared object through systematic desensitisation. Regulating emotions through positive verbal reinforcement is also a popular practice -- for instance, encouraging those afraid of spiders to approach the arachnid in question while repeating the words "that spider can't hurt me and I'm not afraid of it".

However, a UCLA team of psychologists has decided to try a new tact -- looking that spider in the eye (all eight of them) and telling it just how terrified of it you are. Naming an emotion, the team suggests, is the way to set yourself free of being bound to it.

"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 co-author on the paper, published...
Study: verbally acknowledging fear helps dissipate it (Wired UK)

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The study describes how 88 arachnophobes were split into four groups -- their first task, to touch a live tarantula in an open container outdoors. After being asked to get as close to it as they could and having their responses and reactions (such as anxiety-induced sweaty palms) monitored, the four groups were then taken inside for phase two. Here, the first group was asked to describe what they were feeling in detail, for example, “I’m anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider”. The second group was asked to make a more neutral statement aimed at diffusing the experience, such as is used in standard fear therapies: “That little spider can’t hurt me; I’m not afraid of it”. The third group was asked to say something totally irrelevant to the experience while the fourth said nothing.

A week later, all the groups returned to face-off with the tarantula again. This time around, the first group did far better, getting closest to the tarantula and experiencing the least sweaty palms. Individuals that had used the most negative terms when describing their experience got the closest and exhibited the fewest physiological expressions of anxiety – the study therefore concluded that the more emotionally-fuelled the terms, the better the chances of combatting the fear.

"The differences were significant," said Craske. "The results are even more significant given the limited amount of time involved -- with a fuller treatment, the effects may be even larger."

The results of the study actually counteract popular belief, which explains why real-world studies of the theory have never been done before. In previous trials, the UCLA team had asked people what would make them feel worse, looking at a disturbing image or looking at it while describing it with negative words. Nearly every candidate opted for the latter, suggesting fear helps people back from verbalising their emotions.

"People think that makes our negative emotions more intense," explained Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA psychology professor involved in the study. "Well, that is exactly what we asked people to do here. In fact, it's a little better to have people label their emotions -- our intuitions here are wrong."

Lieberman said that although exposure obviously has hugely positive benefits when it comes to battling fear, it is not understood why acknowledging that fear helps dissipate it.

"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."

Studies have shown that people’s ability to label and regulate emotions and the emotional reactions themselves are all dictated by the brain's right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ventromedial_prefrontal_cortex). It's not understood, however, what its role is in making an active link between a particular feeling that has been verbally stated and the emotional and physical reaction to that feeling.

The team hopes the findings will be beneficial to victims of abuse and soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress, with Lieberman saying definitively, "I'm a believer that this approach can have real benefits for people". The method is not so dissimilar from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a cognitive-behavioural approach that encourages individuals to be honest about their feelings. With the UCLA study, however, the team has shown that direct acknowledgement and careful honest labelling can yield dramatically better results.

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Study: verbally acknowledging fear helps dissipate it (Wired UK)

The research suggests verbalising your fear can help reduce its impact.

Edward Vaillant, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), was one of the lead authors of the study, which was published in the journal Psychological Science.

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