Express your fear to get over it: study

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Researchers have discovered that simply describing your feelings at stressful times can make you less scared.

Psychologists from the University of California - Los Angeles found that labelling your emotions when you confront something you fear can make you less afraid.

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," Michelle Crease, senior author of the study.

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 scientists also analysed 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.

The study was published in the journal Psychological Science.