Can describing your feelings when you are particularly stressed make you less anxious? A new study suggests it may very well be so. A new psychology study by the University of California-Los Angeles suggests that labelling your emotions at the moment you are confronting what you fear can indeed have the effect of reducing anxiety. The psychologists asked 88 people with a fear of spiders to approach a large, live tarantula in an open container outdoors. They were told to walk closer and closer to the spider and eventually touch it, if they could, the journal “Psychological Science” reports.

The subjects were then divided into 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”. “Here, there was no attempt to change their experience, participants just stated what they were experiencing,” said Michelle Craske, professor of psychology at UCLA and senior study author, according to a UCLA statement.

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”. 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 found that the first group did far better than the other groups.

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 the other groups.

Source: IANS