New Rx for Spider Fears? Shout It Out

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Date: 06 September 2012 Time: 03:24 PM ET
Feeling frightened? Say so. A new study finds that speaking your emotions out loud can help you confront your fears.

People who fear spiders are less distressed upon approaching a large hairy tarantula when they say, out loud, that they’re afraid. Voicing fear was a more effective tactic at banishing it than the soothing self-talk (“That little spider can’t hurt me”) more often used when people confront their phobias, researchers reported.

“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,” study researcher Michelle Craske, a psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, said in a statement. “Here, there was no attempt to change their experience, just to state what they were experiencing.”

The researchers tested fear in a real-world scenario, asking 88 volunteers who feared spiders to sit in front of a clear container holding a live tarantula. A quarter of the volunteers were asked to simply name their emotions as they watched the spider. A representative response was, “I’m anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider.”

The second group of volunteers were told to calm themselves with words, saying out loud things like, “That little spider can’t hurt me; I’m not afraid of it.” A third group chatted about something irrelevant to the spider and their fears, and the fourth group said nothing at all.

A week later, the same participants came back and were taken to meet the tarantula face-to-face in an outdoor setting. They were told to get as close as they could stand to the spider, and to touch it with a finger, if possible. As the anxious participants did so, the researchers measured their distress and the sweatiness of their palms, a measure of fear. They also recorded how close the volunteers got to the spider.

Naming your emotions

As it turned out, the participants who frankly stated their spider fears a week before were able to get closer with less distress than the other three groups.

“If you’re having less of a threat response, which is indicated by less sweat, that would allow you to get closer; you have less of a fear response,” study researcher Matthew Lieberman, a UCLA professor of psychology and psychiatry, said in a statement. “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.”
In fact, the more negative words the subjects used to describe their feelings about the spider, the closer they were willing to get to it and the less their hands sweated.

“The implication is to encourage patients, as they do their exposure to whatever they are fearful of, to label the emotional responses they are experiencing and label the characteristics of the stimuli — to verbalize their feelings,” Craske said, adding that rather than teaching them something new, that verbal action somehow helps to dissipate those fears. “That lets people experience the very things they are afraid of and say, ‘I feel scared and I’m here.’ They’re not trying to push it away and say it’s not so bad. Be in the moment and allow yourself to experience whatever you’re experiencing.”

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