Defeat Fear by Talking About It: Study

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Afraid of, say, spiders? Look the spider in the eye (all eight of them) and tell it you find it terrifying and even ugly. The result: a freedom from the chains of fear, at least according to a new study from scientists at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

“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 study co-author Michelle Craske of UCLA. “Here, there was no attempt to change their experience, just to state what they were experiencing.”

To reach their findings, Craske and her team took 88 arachnophobes and split them 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 stress responses monitored, the four groups headed indoors for the second phase.

Here, members of the first group were asked to describe their feelings in detail: “I’m anxious and frightened by the ugly, terrifying spider.” The second group was asked to make a more neutral statement to diffuse the fear, such as, “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, and the fourth group said nothing.

All the participants were re-tested in the outdoor setting one week later and were again asked to cozy up to the tarantula and potentially touch it with a finger. The conclusion: the group who expressed their emotional feelings about the spider had better chances of overcoming the fear. The study, announced September 4, was published in the journal Psychological Science.

In previous trials, the UCLA team asked subjects what would make them feel worse, looking at a disturbing image or looking at it while describing it with negative words. Nearly every subject said the latter, which suggests fear holds people back from verbalizing 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.”

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