Want to Beat Spider Phobia? Talk About It

Study using tarantulas finds labeling emotions while stressed eases anxiety

URL of this page: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_129046.html (*this news item will not be available after 12/06/2012)

By Mary Elizabeth Dallas
Friday, September 7, 2012

HealthDay

FRIDAY, Sept. 7 (HealthDay News) -- When people talk about their fears -- even their terror of spiders -- it can ease their anxiety, a new study suggests.

Researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles found that using negative words to label emotions during times of stress does not intensify fear, as some might think.

"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," study co-author Matthew Lieberman, a professor of psychology and of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences, said in a university news release.

The brain region that is involved in "stating how we are feeling seems to mute our emotional responses, at least under certain circumstances," he said.

The study was published online Sept. 4 in the journal Psychological Science.

Study senior author Michelle Craske, a professor of psychology, said their approach differs from typical procedures that aim to have people think differently about the experience in order to reduce their anxiety. "Here, there was no attempt to change their experience, just to state what they were experiencing," she said.

In conducting the study, the researchers asked 88 people with a fear of spiders to walk toward a tarantula in an open container outdoors. If they were able to get close enough, the participants were also told to try touching the spider.

The participants were then brought inside, positioned near another enclosed tarantula, and divided into groups. One group was asked to describe their feelings about the tarantula and their reaction to the spider.

In the second group, participants were told to downplay their fears and describe the spider in a way that made it seem less threatening.

"This is the usual approach for helping individuals to confront the things they fear," said Craske.

The other subjects were either told to talk about something that had nothing to do with the spider, or not to speak at all.
A week later, the researchers repeated the tarantula activity. The study found that the people who accurately described their feelings were able to get significantly closer to the spider this time. Also, their hands were much less sweaty than those in the other groups, suggesting they were less afraid.

"They got closer and they were less emotionally aroused. The differences were significant," said Craske. "With a fuller treatment, the effects may be even larger."

The researchers noted the more negative words the participants in the first group used, the less afraid they were. They explained that by talking about their feelings, the participants eased their fear response.

The researchers said they are exploring how this approach might help people traumatized by rape, war or domestic violence.

Lieberman said, "I'm a believer that this approach can have real benefits for people."

SOURCE: University of California, Los Angeles, news release, Sept. 4, 2012

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Page last updated on 10 September 2012