The Neurobiology of Talking About Your Fears
By Brandon Keim  July 11, 2007 | 10:08:05 AM  Categories: Brain, Mental Health

Putting your fears and worries into words -- with a therapist, or simply over a cup of coffee with a friend -- activates parts of the brain that help calm us down, scientists report.

UCLA psychologist Matthew Lieberman showed 30 people pictures of angry faces, provoking activity in the amygdala -- the brain’s “alarm system.” But when asked to describe the photographs, activity increased in the prefrontal cortex, which is linked to diminished emotional distress.

"The prefrontal cortex seems to be involved in turning off emotional stuff," Lieberman said. So it puts the brakes on the emergency response alarm sent out by the amygdala, thus reducing stress.

It works, he suggests, "when people are explicitly making sense of their own feelings, usually by putting them into words."

Lieberman hopes the research will someday lead to simple methods for identifying whether people have overactive amygdalas or underpowered prefrontal cortices, making them poor candidates for therapy.

But in the meantime, why not a run a study on yourself? Next time you're scared or angry, find a friend and talk about it.

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Worried? Talk It Out [ABC News]

Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity to affective stimuli [Psychological Science]

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