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MATTHEW LIEBERMAN, NEUROSCIENTIST



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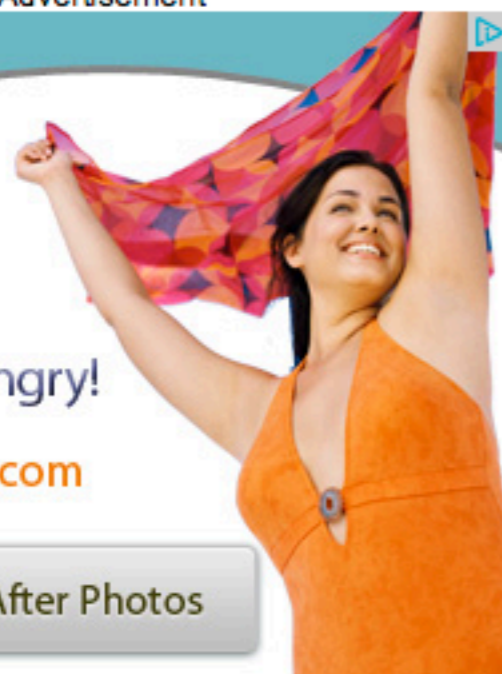
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Diaries: A Healthy Choice



Matthew Lieberman is a psychology professor at U.C.L.A., the editor in chief of "Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience" and the author of the forthcoming "Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect." He is on [Twitter](#).

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Never mind whether your journal will leave a legacy for posterity's sake – putting your feelings into words is good for you. Psychologist [Jamie Pennebaker](#) long ago showed that people who spent about an hour writing about something emotionally bad that happened to them ended up going to see the doctor less over the next six months than people who wrote about something more mundane. [Sian Beilock](#) found that writing about one's anxieties right before taking a math test could improve a person's test score.

Most recently, my collaborators and I have shown that spider phobics who express their fears about a nearby spider end up more willing to get close to the spider than a phobic who sees the spider without expressing his fears. A great deal of therapy focuses on trying to change people's beliefs, but we and others are finding that just putting those beliefs into words is enough to reduce our distress and produce other mental and physical health benefits.

What is in the magic tonic that is conjured by labeling our feelings? My lab has spent several years trying to answer this question using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). We have found that labeling our feelings activates an implicit kind of emotion regulation. There is a region in the right prefrontal cortex (near your right temple) that becomes more active when you intentionally try to regulate your emotions either by trying to suppress them or changing how you interpret an event ("Getting laid off was great because now I can pursue my lifelong dream of becoming a one-man band").

When this prefrontal region is more active, regions involved in negative feelings, like the amygdala, become less active. It just so happens that labeling our feelings produces this same pattern, increasing activity in the prefrontal region while dampening the amygdala's response. If the amygdala is like an alarm clock alerting us to potential threats, putting feelings into words is like hitting the snooze button. The end result is being less distressed in the face of something we fear (whether it's spiders or math exams) and less stressed over the long term, which can contribute to better physical health. So whether you are Brad Pitt or not, you would do well to spend some time writing those feelings down.

Articulating our beliefs and insecurities is enough to reduce our distress and produce other mental and physical health benefits.

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