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The Power of Expressing Yourself

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People always say it's good to put "your feelings into words." But is it true? If you think about it, the advice seems somewhat counterintuitive. If you are anxious, scared, or worried about something, is it really going to make you feel better to dwell on this anxiety by speaking or writing about it?

The answer, it turns out, is yes. New research published this month in the journal *Psychological Science* shows quite clearly that, when it comes to the phobias we have, simply talking about them helps curb negative responses to what we fear.

UCLA scientists Katharina Kircanski, Matt Lieberman, and Michelle Craske demonstrated the power of words for people with a professed spider phobia. The experiment went something like this: First, the spider phobics were asked to stand outside next to a Chilean rose-haired tarantula (don't worry, it was in a container). People were encouraged to approach the spider little by little. On the first step people took, they were about five feet from the spider. On the last step, they had to touch the spider continuously with the tip of their index finger. Not so fun for spider phobics, but the experiment was only getting started. Next, people were randomly assigned to take part in one of four treatment groups while they sat about two feet from the spider.

In the affect-labeling (i.e., putting your feelings into words) group, people were instructed to speak a sentence that included negative words about the spider and their feelings—for example, "I feel anxious the disgusting tarantula will jump on me."

Those in the reappraisal group were instead told to speak about the spider in non-emotional terms—for example, "Looking at the little spider is not dangerous for me."

People assigned to the distraction group had to say something unrelated to the spider—for example "There is a television in front of my couch at home."

A fourth, a control group, received no particular instructions.

Everyone went through the exercises for their specific treatment group several times in a row spanning a two-day period. A week later, folks were invited back to interact with a new spider.

So, what did the researchers find? Interestingly, there was no difference in reported fear toward the spider. People were afraid of the spider, and this self-professed fear didn't change over the course of the experiment, regardless of what treatment they had completed. However, there was a difference in both physiological measures of fearful arousal (skin conductance) and willingness to approach the spider. The affect-labeling group showed less arousal and was also generally more willing to interact with the spider

one week after the treatment than the other groups. And the more fear and anxiety words people in the affect-labeling group used to describe their spider phobia during the experiment, the more they seemed to get over their fear of spiders.

It might seem odd that talking about your worries would actually lessen negative arousal and help you act less fearful, but there is a growing body of work showing the power of speech. In a paper my graduate student, Gerardo Ramirez, and I published last year in the journal *Science*, and that I blogged about [here](#), we showed that simply getting high school students to spend 10 minutes before a high-stress exam putting their worries down on paper led to increased test performance—boosting the grades of those students who professed to have the most test anxiety from a B- to a B+.

Ironically, when we label our fears, they are less likely to pop up in mind at a later date and lead us astray. Verbalizing our anxieties seems to help us manage our behavior. This is true whether we are trying to get over our fear of eight-legged creatures or ace a high-stakes test.

For more on how to curb fears and anxieties so you can perform at your best, check out my book [Choke!](#)

Follow me on [Twitter](#).

Kircanski, K. et al. (2012). Feelings Into Words: Contributions of Language to Exposure Therapy. *Psychological Science*

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