

# Language and Emotion – Insights from Psychological Science

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We use language every day to express our emotions, but can this language actually affect what and how we feel? Two new studies from *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, explore the ways in which the interaction between language and emotion influences our well-being.

## [Putting Feelings into Words Can Help Us Cope with Scary Situations](#)

Katharina Kircanski and colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles investigated whether verbalizing a current emotional experience, even when that experience is negative, might be an effective method for treating for people with spider phobias. In an exposure therapy study, participants were split into different experimental groups and they were instructed to approach a spider over several consecutive days. One group was told to put their feelings into words by describing their negative emotions about approaching the spider. Another group was asked to ‘reappraise’ the situation by describing the spider using emotionally neutral words. A third group was told to talk about an unrelated topic (things in their home) and a fourth group received no intervention. Participants who put their negative feelings into words were most effective at lowering their levels of physiological arousal. They were also slightly more willing to approach the spider. The findings suggest that talking about your feelings – even if they’re negative – may help you to cope with a scary situation.

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## **Unlocking Past Emotion: The Verbs We Use Can Affect Mood and Happiness**

Our memory for events is influenced by the language we use. When we talk about a past occurrence, we can describe it as ongoing (I was running) or already completed (I ran). To investigate whether using these different wordings might affect our mood and overall happiness, Will Hart of the University of Alabama conducted four experiments in which participants either recalled or experienced a positive, negative, or neutral event. They found that people who described a positive event with words that suggested it was ongoing felt more positive. And when they described a negative event in the same way, they felt more negative. The authors conclude that one potential way to improve mood could be to talk about negative past events as something that already happened as opposed to something that was happening.

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