

Abstract Words as Emotion Buffers: Affect Labeling and Distress Reduction

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Abstract

Putting feelings into words can dampen emotions, reducing the distress elicited by aversive stimuli. Across two experiments, we explored whether the effectiveness of such affect labeling depends on the concreteness of the label. Whereas concrete labels (e.g., blood) may amplify negative emotions via perceptual reactivation, more abstract labels (e.g., danger) may distance the labeler from the source of emotional distress, thus alleviating negative affect. We investigated this proposal by having participants passively watch distressing images or label the same images with either concrete or abstract labels. We found that abstract labels yielded a greater reduction in participants self-reported distress (compared to passive watching) than concrete labels. These results suggest that not all labels are equally effective as emotion buffers: abstract labels enable us to better separate ourselves from our negative feelings.