



Name that feeling: You'll feel better

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By Julie Steenhuysen

CHICAGO (Reuters) - Putting feelings into words makes sadness and anger less intense, U.S. brain researchers said on Wednesday, in a finding that explains why talking to a therapist -- or even a sympathetic bartender -- often makes people feel better.

They said talking about negative feelings activates a part of the brain responsible for impulse control.

"This region of the brain seems to be involved in putting on the brakes," said University of California, Los Angeles researcher Matthew Lieberman, whose study appears in the journal *Psychological Science*.

He and colleagues scanned the brains of 30 people -- 18 women and 12 men between 18 and 36 -- who were shown pictures of faces expressing strong emotions.

They were asked to categorize the feelings in words like sad or angry, or to choose between two gender-specific names like "Sally or Harry" that matched the face.

What they found is that when people attached a word like angry to an angry-looking face, the response in the amygdala portion of the brain that handles fear, panic and other strong emotions decreased.

"This seems to dampen down the response in these basic emotional circuits in the brain -- in this case the amygdala," Lieberman said in a telephone interview.

What lights up instead is the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, part of the brain that controls impulses.

"This is the only region of the entire brain that is more active when you choose an emotion word for the picture than when you choose a name for the picture," he said.

He said the same region of the brain has been found in prior studies to play a role in motor control.

"If you are driving along and you see a yellow light, you have to inhibit one response in order to step on the brake," he said. "This same region helps to inhibit emotional responses as well."

The researchers did not find significant differences along gender lines, but Lieberman said prior studies have hinted at some differences in the benefits men and women derive from talking about their feelings.

"Women may do more of this spontaneously, but when men are instructed to do it, they may get more benefit from it," he said.

The results may alter the traditional view of why talking about feelings helps.

"I think we all believe that by talking about our feelings, we reach deep new insights, and that understanding is what transforms us," he said.

"What we see is something that at first blush is far more trivial. By simply putting the name to an emotion, the person doesn't feel like they've come to any new insight. And yet we see this dampening response anyway."

Lieberman said while there likely are benefits to gaining enhanced understanding, talking about feelings may do something more basic.

"It's not just the deep thoughts," he said. "It's something about the way we are built."

