UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Abstract Words as Emotion Buffers: Affect Labeling and Distress Reduction

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6hn915jp

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 42(0)

Authors

Walsh, Daniel
Holmes, Kevin

Publication Date

2020

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Abstract Words as Emotion Buffers: Affect Labeling and Distress Reduction

Daniel Walsh
Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States

Kevin Holmes
Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, United States

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.

©2020 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).