

Swearing may help with pain, but at a social cost

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A study found that swearing in the presence of others, but not swearing when alone, was related to decreases in emotional support, which in turn were related to increases in depressive symptoms over the course of the research period.

(Medical Xpress) -- A new study indicates that swearing might initially make you feel better, but it's at the risk of alienating those around you.

Many people find that a bit of blasphemy can take some of the sting out of an illness or injury. In fact, researchers are starting to understand the analgesic benefits of swearing. But less well understood are the social ramifications that come from using profanity.

A new study by [psychologists](#) at the University of Arizona affirms that profanity helps deal with pain. The bad news, though, is that folks around you can be a little irked at your behavior.

For a stubbed toe, a single expletive probably won't severely damage any relationships. But for people with more serious issues, such as [chronic illnesses](#) or injuries, using foul language can come with a cost.

The study, "Naturalistically Observed Swearing, [Emotional Support](#), and [Depressive Symptoms](#) in Women Coping With Illness," is in the current issue of the journal *Health Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association.

"We find that swearing by yourself is pretty innocuous and may – or may not – help for coping with health issues," said Matthias Mehl, an associate professor of psychology at the UA and the corresponding author of the study.

"However, swearing in the presence of others can, in certain populations, run the risk of putting off your social network, which may react with a withdrawal of emotional support, which can then in turn put you on a path toward developing depression," Mehl said.

Mehl, along with Megan Robbins, the lead author of the study and a UA graduate student, and their colleagues found an earlier study about pain and swearing "interesting" but thought it neglected the fact that swearing is often a social phenomenon and as such could have interpersonal consequences for coping as well.

"Specifically, we wondered whether swearing can be 'socially toxic' and erode the availability of social resources that are needed for coping well with adversity," Mehl said.

This is Mehl's first study on the social effects of swearing but, he said, it is part of a larger research endeavor to "show how the small and subtle things in our daily lives can be psychologically important and consequential."

For the study, Mehl and his group hypothesized that swearing would be related to receiving less emotional support, which in turn would put patients at risk for developing depression.

Subjects in the study were fitted with electronic eavesdropping devices that recorded 50-second sound bites every nine minutes, about 10 percent of their daily routines. The devices are unobtrusive and the subjects never knew when exactly the devices were recording and when not.

"We also hypothesized that this sequence should be limited to swearing in a social context and should not happen when patients swear by themselves. And, indeed we found that swearing in the presence of others but not swearing when alone was related to decreases in emotional support, which in turn were related to increases in depressive symptoms over the course of the study period.

"Statistically, the decreases in emotional support mediated the effects of swearing in the presence of others on depressive symptoms suggesting that the hypothesized causal sequence might indeed exist, even though, of course, correlational patterns can never establish causality."

The study had a small sample size but raised a number of questions he said will be addressed in a series of follow-up studies with funding from the National Cancer Institute.

"Our sample consisted exclusively of women in midlife for whom swearing might have violated gender and age norms. Thus, it is unclear

to what degree acting in nonstereotypic ways, or swearing, was ultimately responsible for the dwindling of emotional support. In other words, it is possible that the negative interpersonal consequences of swearing may not extend to other populations," he said.

Other populations such as men, who face fewer social prohibitions for swearing, might be a case in point. There might even be positive consequences in younger people for whom swearing with a peer group may serve as a bonding function and thereby facilitate emotional support.

"The answer is that we currently do not know – but we will try to find out."

And the whole notion of what constitutes profanity could be up for discussion, since swear words often derive their meaning in the context of their usage. But a glossary of "bad words," either in context or not, can still be identified even by automatic text analysis software that was used in the study. We'll leave those to your imagination.

Provided by University of Arizona

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