

# New research reveals why people say things they later regret

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

People are more likely to disclose information that they are usually careful about concealing when they are more awake and alert, according to a new University of Melbourne study.

Dr. Brent Coker from the Faculty of Business and Economics, who co-

authored a new research paper in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, says that arousal—the degree to which someone is awake and alert—causes people to say things automatically rather than think things through before speaking. Dr. Coker said automatic responses are usually things that people would try to conceal from others, and may cause regret.

"Ironically, the times when we're most awake and alert are also the times when we have to be very careful about what we say—like job interviews, media engagements, important work meetings, or even romantic encounters," Dr. Coker said.

The research paper outlines three of eight experiments conducted by Dr. Coker and co-author Professor Ann L. McGill from the University of Chicago.

The first study asked participants to write a dating profile and found that 'aroused' people disclosed more embarrassing, emotional, intimate, and incriminating information about themselves than those who were relatively relaxed. A follow-up study on the same data found that the aroused participants' profiles were less attractive for dating than those of the more relaxed participants, suggesting that disclosing too much information also negatively affects people's attractiveness.

The second study looked at online trolling behaviour and how likely people are to reveal instances when they said mean or malicious things to others online. The study found that people are more likely to disclose information one would not normally disclose when they are aroused.

The third study found that people are more likely to disclose highly personal information after physical exercise.

"Saying the wrong thing in the wrong moment may create awkwardness,

be offensive, damage trust, or harm perceptions towards our character. Politicians and CEOs seem to do it all the time. We really need to make an extra effort to control what comes out of our mouths during times of stress—which might explain why so many people have arguments over Christmas," Dr. Coker said.

According to Dr. Coker, the secret to increasing the accuracy of what we say is to try to adopt daily strategies to reduce stress, since stress is related to arousal.

"Consciously controlling your breathing and listening to chilled music are two strategies known to work. Then there are the more traditional strategies such as reducing how much coffee you drink, getting enough sleep and eating well.

"As any interrogator will tell you, there are limits to how much stress someone will take before they 'spill the beans'. Our research suggests that it actually doesn't take very much [stress](#) at all before people will say something they might later regret."

Provided by University of Melbourne

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