Emotion vocabulary reflects state of well-being, study suggests

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Vocabulary that one uses to describe their emotions is an indicator of mental and physical health and overall well-being, according to an analysis led by a scientist at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and published today in *Nature Communications*. A larger negative emotion vocabulary—or different ways to describe similar feelings—correlates with more psychological distress and poorer physical health, while a larger positive emotion vocabulary correlates with better well-being and physical health.

"Our language seems to indicate our expertise with states of emotion we are more comfortable with," said lead author Vera Vine, Ph.D., postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at Pitt. "It looks like there's a congruency between how many different ways we can name a feeling and how often and likely we are to experience that feeling."

To examine how emotion vocabulary depth corresponds broadly with lived experience, Vine and her team analyzed public blogs written by more than 35,000 individuals and stream-of-consciousness essays by 1,567 college students. The students also self-reported their moods periodically during the experiment.

Overall, people who used a wider variety of negative emotion words tended to display linguistic markers associated with lower well-being—such as references to illness and being alone—and reported greater depression and neuroticism, as well as poorer physical health.

Conversely, those who used a variety of positive emotion words tended to display linguistic markers of well-being—such as references to leisure activities, achievements and being part of a group—and reported higher rates of conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, overall health, and lower rates of depression and neuroticism.

These findings suggest that an individual's vocabulary may correspond to emotional experiences, but it does not speak to whether emotion vocabularies were helpful or harmful in bringing about emotional experiences.

"There's a lot of excitement right now about expanding people's emotional vocabularies and teaching how to precisely articulate negative feelings," Vine said. "While we often hear the phrase, 'name it to tame it' when referring to negative emotions, I hope this paper can inspire clinical researchers who are developing emotion-labeling interventions for clinical practice, to study the potential pitfalls of encouraging over-labeling of negative emotions, and the potential utility of teaching positive words."

During the stream-of-consciousness exercise, Vine and colleagues found that students who used more names for sadness grew sadder over the course of the experiment; people who used more names for fear grew more worried; and people who used more names for anger grew angrier.

"It is likely that people who have had more upsetting life experiences have developed richer negative emotion vocabularies to describe the worlds around them," noted James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and an author on the project. "In everyday life, these same people can more readily label nuanced feelings as negative which may ultimately affect their moods."

More information: Vera Vine et al, Natural emotion vocabularies as windows on distress and well-being, *Nature Communications* (2020). DOI: 10.1038/s41467-020-18349-0

A custom open-source software developed by these researchers to help with emotion vocabulary computation is called "Vocabulate." It's available at osf.io/8ckyp/ and github.com/ryanboyd/Vocabulate

Provided by University of Pittsburgh