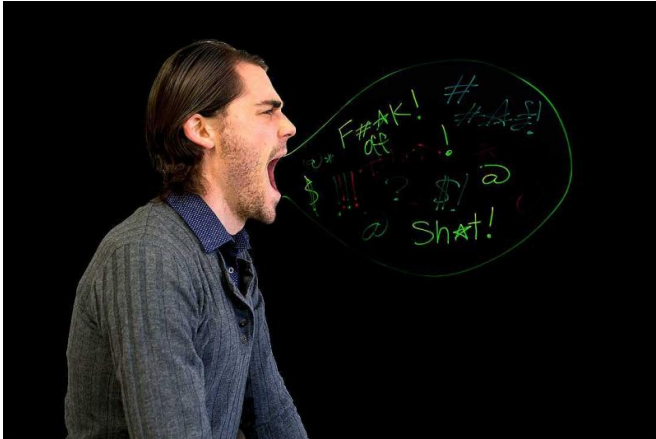


Swearing relieves both physical and social pain, study finds

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A new study showed that both physical and social pain can be eased by swearing. Credit: Massey University

Swearing has been shown to relieve physical pain when it comes to banging your toe or slamming a finger in a door. Now, a new psychology study shows we shouldn't be coy about cursing when suffering from an aching heart or hurt feelings.

In his just-published study: Hurt feelings and four letter words: Swearing alleviates the pain of [social distress](#), Dr Michael Philipp, a lecturer at Massey University's School of Psychology, suggests [swearing](#) aloud may provide some relief from people who are experiencing "short-term social distress." This could be anything from a lovers' tiff to being excluded from a social situation, he says.

Dr Philipp, director of the Social Cognition Lab at Massey's Manawatū Campus, says previous studies in the United States have investigated common methods – such as paracetamol – for alleviating both physical and [social pain](#). However, he says, none have yet investigated whether swearing aloud may alleviate the consequences of social distress in the same way that it seems to help with physical distress.

He conducted an experiment to test Pain Overlap Theory, which asserts physical and social/[emotional pain](#) share the same underlying processing system. It involved 70 participants split into two groups, who were tested for feelings of social pain and sensitivity to physical pain. This was after they had written either about an inclusive or a distressing social event to induce corresponding emotions, and then were randomly assigned to either swear aloud or say a non-swear word aloud.

"The results suggest that socially distressed participants who swore out loud experienced less social pain than those who did not," says Dr Philipp. They also experienced less sensitivity to physical pain.

"Previous research suggests that social stressors, like rejection and ostracism, not only feel painful but also increase peoples' sensitivity to physical pain," he says. "Pain Overlap Theory suggests that social [distress](#) feels painful because both social and physical pain is biologically coupled. Pain overlap theory predicts that anything affecting physical pain should have similar effects on social pain."

Swearing works to alleviate social and physical pain, he says, by diluting the intensity of pain and by distracting the person in pain, he says.

Swearing is good, but not from the rooftops

And although swearing is still taboo, that's also part of its cathartic healing power. But people need to be aware of context and who else is in their presence before they unleash a torrent of blasphemy, he adds.

He warns that swearing every day or in mildly irritating situations might weaken the power of profanity when you need it most – so be thrifty with those swear words if you want to benefit from their healing properties.

"There is still speculation about why swearing aloud has the effect it does on [physical pain](#) and social pain. What's clear is that swearing is not a completely maladaptive reaction to a sore thumb or a broken heart," he says.

However he stresses that swearing is not a quick fix for people experiencing serious emotional [pain](#) from grief, abuse or other trauma, and clinical care may be needed in this case.

The paper, co-authored with Laura Lombardo from the University of Queensland, is available in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. The experiment took place in Brisbane, with students from the University of Queensland.

More information: Michael C. Philipp et al. Hurt feelings and four letter words: Swearing alleviates the pain of social distress, *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2264](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2264)

Provided by Massey University

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