

The Power of Words

During college, my friend Lisa introduced me to a surefire way to ease whatever ailed you. She talked about it. Whether Lisa had a cold, a bad hair day, or a broken heart, her friends knew about it. Her philosophy was simple: If you tell other people about your physical or emotional pain, you lighten your burden and don't have to carry it around by yourself. Lisa was a firm believer in the adage, "A problem shared is a problem halved."

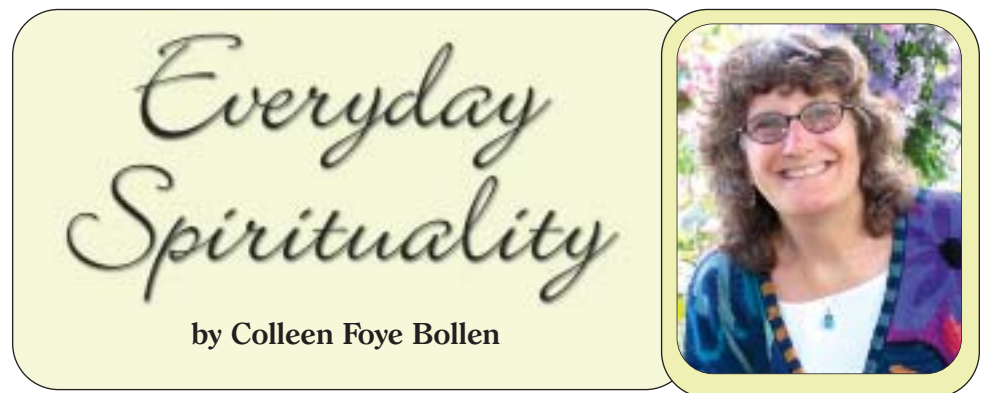
Well, it turns out Lisa was right. Researchers at University of California at Los Angeles recently discovered that verbalizing or writing about feelings decreases grief, anger and pain, thus promoting better health.

Matthew D. Lieberman, PhD, an associate professor of psychology, and a team of researchers conducted a brain imaging study at UCLA. They began by flashing photographs of faces expressing strong emotions, such as fury, sadness, or fear at study participants. Researchers found the images, flashed so quickly they only registered subliminally, were enough to trigger a part of the participants' brains called the amygdala. This section of the

brain serves as an "alarm" to protect the body in times of danger.

Once participants' emotional warning systems were activated, researchers asked them to label the emotion expressed by each face. According to an article in the journal *Psychological Science*, the act of attaching the correct label to each face reduced the activity in participants' amygdalas. In addition to lessening the response in that area of the brain, putting feelings into words activated another region of the brain called the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex. Located behind the forehead and eyes, this region is associated with thinking in words about emotional experiences. While research is not conclusive, that area of the brain is believed to function as a shut off switch for the amygdala's alarm system.

Lieberman explained his theory in a news release. "When you put feelings into words, you're activating this prefrontal region and seeing a reduced response in the amygdala," he said. "In the same way you hit the brake when you're driving and you see a yellow light, when you put feelings into words, you seem to be



by Colleen Foye Bollen

hitting the brakes on your emotional responses."

This is one research study that is not heading for the dusty archives. The information can easily be put into action. Following Lieberman's suggestion of putting your feelings into words just might help you feel better. The next time you feel down in the dumps or just plain sick, try it. Express your feelings by labeling the emotion you are experiencing. Say the label aloud to yourself or use a friend as your sounding board. Notice if there is a shift in how you feel physically or emotionally.

The second alternative is to write out your feelings. Whether you tap them out on a computer keyboard or use a journal and pen, the benefits are the same. Thankfully, it is not necessary to be a perfect speller or a great writer to express your inner thoughts and emotions. And, unless you want to, you never need to share your writings.

After you are done journaling, re-examine how you feel. If you detect changes, write down your observations.

Take turns switching between verbalizing and writing out your feelings to determine which process works best for you. You may have a strong preference for one technique or find the outcome is situational. If the latter is true, your favored process will depend on what you are going through. Sometimes one way will work and other times the second process might net better results. Either way, you will be able to lighten your physical or emotional pain and, as Lisa often acclaimed, not have to carry the burden around by yourself.

Colleen Foye Bollen is a healing arts practitioner offering personalized Jin Shin Jyutsu, reiki, and sound healing treatments at her healing arts studio, in hospitals and through distant healing. For appointments call (206) 367-0491 or visit her website at www.flowingstillness.com. Colleen will be teaching a class about everyday spirituality at the University of Washington Women's center on November 7. For details go to: <http://depts.washington.edu/womenctr/>

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