

Say 'ow' to increase your pain tolerance

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SINGAPORE – When they set out to study whether expressing pain vocally would help a person tolerate pain better, they did not anticipate that the study would create such an impression.

Findings from the study, conducted by National University of Singapore researchers with 56 local participants, was published in the *Journal of Pain* in January, and drew widespread media attention, with reports in *The Daily Telegraph* in the United Kingdom and United States-based *The Huffington Post*.

Speaking at an interview yesterday, National University of Singapore Associate Professor Annett Schirmer, who is from the Department of Psychology, said: "This is not my area of study and we're newbies. So I was very surprised about the feedback. I'm very happy that even while we're not very experienced on this, we were able to make it meaningful for people."

The study is the first of its kind, presenting evidence that saying "ow" improves pain tolerance.

Assoc Prof Schirmer, who was the lead author of the study, said: "Researchers have looked at a lot of behaviours, things that people do in pain, but they've never really paid any attention to the vocalisations. They were always seen as only an expression, a signal, for others, and not something that helps the person who's actually in pain."

Added NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences graduate Genevieve Swee, who worked alongside Assoc Prof Schirmer as part of her honours thesis: "It was unexpected and I ... how do I say this ... (was) very elated and humbled by the responses." The 56 participants were asked to go through two lab sessions for the research. Both sessions required them to immerse their hands in extremely cold water.

"On their first visit, they were told to say "ow" whenever they were given instructions to do so. They were able to keep their hand in the water for 24 seconds when they did not vocalise their pain.

But when they said "ow", they were able to hold on for five more seconds.

The researchers hope that the study's findings will be used in a clinical setting and patients will be encouraged to vocalise pain.

"I think it is really important if you are having a procedure done to someone, to actually talk to this person ... if he gets an injection or kind of a painful procedure, it's really important to just engage the person into vocalising," said Assoc Prof Schirmer.