

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Study Says Swear Words May Be Good For Us”

According to a recent survey, a majority of Americans use expletives every day, with one in four letting out their first cuss word of the day before breakfast. Swearing is the most common response to frustrations or stressful situations—whether finance-related, matters of the heart, or professional woes—according to 63% of survey participants. We have always been cautioned, especially by religious authorities, that use of curse or swear words can really get us into trouble. Swearing can get a bad rap but studies show there might be some health benefits to letting a curse word fly once in a while. Research suggests that the practice helps us manage stress and possibly provides measurable health benefits. From improving pain tolerance to providing a boost to physical strength and athletic performance, here’s what studies say about using swear words. According to a study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, this swear word response may be more than a knee-jerk reaction to stubbing a toe or accidentally touching a hot surface—it could help us deal with the pain. Researchers found that conventional swearing resulted in a 32% increase in pain threshold scores and a 33% increase in pain tolerance. Using curse words also increased subjects’ ratings for emotion, humor, and distraction, compared with the neutral word group. John McEnroe may be more infamous for his mid-play meltdowns than he is famous for his tennis skills, but his tirades may actually have been part of what made him a top player. Evidence suggests that cursing aloud can help us reach higher peaks in physical performance. The researchers behind one study, published in *Psychology in Sport and Exercise*, hypothesized that swearing may increase pain tolerance by activating the sympathetic nervous system, which suggests that cursing may also affect improvements in strength and power. Researchers measured the impacts of a repeated swear word versus a neutral word, during anaerobic and isometric exercise. The study found that swearing resulted in a 4.6% increase in initial power during a 30-second stationary bicycle test in the first experiment, and an 8.2% increase in maximum hand-grip strength in the second experiment. Some research suggests that swearing may actually be a sign of greater levels of honesty. Three experimental studies found a positive association between using curse words and honesty. Profanity was associated with less lying and deception at the individual level and with higher integrity at the society level. However, those who cursed tended to give off an impression of lower intelligence, untrustworthiness, and a somewhat limited vocabulary.

In the America that I love, using profanity can result in others thinking less of you. While cussing may offer some benefits, it’s wise to pick the time and place carefully.

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