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Choking in Math

February 21, 2007

Why do talented math students choke under pressure?

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Transcript

BOB HIRSHON (host):

Why smart math students make dumb mistakes. I'm Bob Hirshon and this is Science Update.

The best math students are also the most susceptible to choking under pressure. This according to the work of University of Chicago psychologist Sian Beilock. She reported new findings at the AAAS Annual Meeting in San Francisco. Her team found that top students rely on their superior working memory to solve complex problems. But average students often fall back on less accurate shortcuts, like estimation.

SIAN BEILOCK (University of Chicago):

Under pressure, however, our higher working memory individuals didn't continue with the complex algorithm. They actually switched to the shortcut. So their performance looked like the lower working memory individuals' under pressure, and now we have some idea why this is the case.

HIRSHON:

She said that because pressure appears to sabotage working memory, high-stakes exams may not accurately identify the best and the brightest. I'm Bob Hirshon, for AAAS, the science society.

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