

www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-talk-test-stress-0114-20110113,0,3580231.story

## chicagotribune.com

### Take note of simple tactic to beat test stress

#### Study: Students who write about worries before exam score higher

By Tara Malone, Tribune reporter

6:50 PM CST, January 13, 2011

Today's teens know well the alphabet soup of high-stakes tests — the SATs, the ACTs, the APs and the flurry of finals at the end of every semester.

But they might not know about a proven new tactic to ease their anxious nerves on test day and even boost their scores.

A team of University of Chicago psychological scientists found that high school and college students who jotted down their worries for 10 minutes before exam time avoided choking under the pressure. In fact, they performed markedly better.

In a study released Thursday in the journal *Science*, Sian Beilock and Gerardo Ramirez asked half a class of freshmen facing their first final exams to write down their concerns about the upcoming test while other students journaled about an unrelated topic.

To a teen, students who wrote about their stress scored as well or better than those who didn't, scoring an average B-plus compared with a B-minus.

The researchers repeated the experiment a year later with the same results.

"It's getting negative thoughts and worries down on paper that seems to be the benefit," said Beilock, author of *"Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To."*

The idea is to clear the working memory — sort of a mental scratch pad in the brain — of worries that interfere with the cognitive resources needed for the task at hand. Beilock likens it to a computer with two dozen programs running at once.

Committing concerns to paper seems to clear all that away, setting up teens to earn top scores when it most counts.

advertisement

The advertisement features the Sprint logo in the top right corner. The main text reads: "Have it all while on the Sprint network with an Everything Data Plan." Below this text is a "Learn more" button. To the right of the button is a large, 3D yellow number "69" with a "99" in the top right corner of the "9". Below the number "69" is the text "7 month". In the bottom left corner of the advertisement, there is a "Replay" icon and the word "Replay".

"There's lots of stress in terms of getting the right marks, getting the right grades to excel," Beilock said. "The nice thing here is students can write on their own."

[tmalone@tribune.com](mailto:tmalone@tribune.com)

Copyright © 2011, [Chicago Tribune](#)