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Students who write about anxieties do better on tests, study says

Spending a few minutes before a test to write down their anxieties could help students perform better, researchers report in the journal Science.

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Psychologists at the University of Chicago have discovered a quick and easy way for stressed-out students to avoid choking on a high-stakes test: Take a few minutes right before the exam to write about all those fears.

A study published online Thursday by the journal Science found that anxious students given 10 minutes to put their feelings down on paper performed significantly better than their peers who wrote about other topics or did nothing at all.

The idea that there are simple steps to improve test scores — outside of, say, private tutors or SAT prep courses — is sure to be welcome news for students, parents and educators who have long struggled to get students to perform their best on midterms, finals and college entrance exams.

"You don't have to wield these expensive or time-consuming tools," said psychology professor Sian L. Beilock, who conducted the study with graduate student Gerardo Ramirez.

Writing about emotional events had been shown to reduce rumination — which is when people devote mental energy to revisiting distressing ideas — in the clinically depressed, Beilock said. Perhaps writing about one's emotions before an exam would free up that brain power for the task at hand.

The pair performed a series of experiments to test their hypothesis. First, they asked 20 college students to take a math test just to get a base-line score, and simply told them to do their best. Next, to raise the stakes, they told the students that they could receive a monetary award if they got a good grade, and that they were being videotaped.

Before beginning the main test, the researchers asked one group of students to spend 10 minutes writing down their feelings about the test, and the other group sat quietly for that time. Everyone then took the same exam.

The researchers found that students who sat quietly did 12% worse than they had on the pre-test, and the ones who wrote about their anxieties improved their scores by 5%.

They repeated the experiment with three groups of college students: one that wrote about their test-related anxieties, one that sat quietly and a third that was asked to write about an unemotional event unrelated to the test. This time, the group that wrote about their fears improved their scores by 4%, and students in the other two groups saw their scores fall 7%. The results showed that it was writing about anxieties — not the mere act of writing — that made the difference.

Beilock and Ramirez then went to see 106 ninth-grade biology students at a Chicago-area private school six weeks before their final exam and asked the students to rate how anxious they became in testing situations. The researchers found that anxious students who spent 10 minutes writing about their feelings about the final exam earned an average grade of B-plus, compared with the B-minus received by anxious students who were told to write about a topic they thought would not be on the test.

But the coolheaded students didn't see the same bump. The researchers concluded that the writing exercise probably helped put anxious students on more equal footing with their less flappable peers.

"There's something about writing, just putting your vague thoughts and feelings into words, that seems to have a powerful influence," said Akira Miyake, a psychologist at the University of Colorado at Boulder, who was not involved in the study. "This opens up a lot of interesting issues."

But he cautioned against applying the findings too soon: "It's possible someone might start thinking about those negative thoughts over and over, so that might be another issue to be examined."

amina.khan@latimes.com