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# Don't choke! Students write off test anxiety



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*Cari Nierenberg writes:* Students who are the biggest worrywarts before taking a test might calm their nerves -- and improve their results -- by writing about their fears for 10 minutes before the exam, a new study suggests.

Researchers looked at students who seemed to choke under pressure and didn't perform as well as expected in stress-filled situations, in the study published in the Jan. 14 issue of the journal *Science*.

They asked a group of 20 college students to do a series of math problems, telling them that the highest scorers on the test would be rewarded with money. To really turn up the heat, students were also told they would be videotaped during the exam and both their teachers and peers would be watching.

One group of students was asked to sit quietly for 10 minutes before the test; the rest spent the time writing down their thoughts and feelings about the upcoming exam. Those who put pen to paper outperformed the others, enjoying a 5 percent boost on their test scores.

"Writing down these negative thoughts helps students to see them on paper and rethink their negativity. Then those thoughts are less likely to pop in your head during the test and distract you," says [Sian Beilock](#), the study's senior author and an associate professor of psychology at the University of Chicago. "It's almost as if you've emptied your mind so you have the cognitive horsepower to perform at your best."

Beilock and her colleague Gerardo Ramirez repeated similar tests with more than 50 ninth-graders taking a final exam in biology.

Freshman with the most pretest jitters who wrote about their worries before the final earned a B+ on the exam, while students who wrote about something else got a B-.

"The benefits are the most robust for students who are habitually anxious about taking tests," points out Beilock, author of "Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting it Right When You Have to."

The scientists suspected that expressive writing could help anxious students because other research has found that writing regularly in a journal was an effective mood-booster for depressed patients.

And the benefits may extend beyond the classroom.

"Taking the time to jot down your thoughts before you enter a do-or-die situation," whether it's a job interview, public speaking or an athletic event, "may do a lot to help you excel or shine in that setting," says Beilock.

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