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## Got exam jitters? Write them out

Francine Kopun

Nancy Sandhu gives herself a pep talk before exams.

"If you go in nervous, you're psyching yourself out. I just keep telling myself that I know what I'm doing. I've studied. I'm prepared," says Sandhu, a second-year business student at Ryerson.

Sandhu's strategy — positive self-talk — is a good one. But a new University of Chicago study, published in the journal *Science*, has found another simple coping strategy: When students prone to test anxiety were given 10 minutes before an exam to write about what was making them nervous, their test scores improved.

The researchers undertook four studies with two groups of college students and two groups of Grade 9 students, totalling 173 participants. In the laboratory, researchers gave college students a math test and simply asked them to do their best. Then they had them write a second test in a high-stakes environment by telling them that scholarships were in play, that they were part of a team, and that their teammates had already performed well.

Those who wrote about their anxieties fared 2.5 times better on the second test than those who did not. A second study with college students showed that it wasn't just writing in general that improved scores, it was writing about anxieties that did the trick.

In the Grade 9 classrooms, students with high test anxiety who wrote about their fears fared significantly better than those who did not, boosting their average exam grades from B-minus to B-plus.

The writing exercise works by reducing intrusive thoughts and worries during the exam, says Sian Beilock, an associate professor in the department of psychology at the University of Chicago. "It is four studies in one paper, and we replicate our effects two years in a row in high-school classrooms, so the effect is pretty robust."

Reed Hilton-Eddy, a learning strategist at Ryerson's Learning Success Centre, also sees benefits to writing out worries before an exam. Students sometimes get stuck imagining catastrophic outcomes, she says, such as failing the test, dropping out of school and being unemployed. And once they get their adrenalin going, they're not thinking properly.

"Our body does not understand the difference between a tiger jumping at us and an exam on a piece of paper. And if your body is trying to fight a tiger while you're writing an exam, you're not going to be thinking clearly," says Hilton-Eddy. Taking 10 minutes to write about exam jitters could help students collect their thoughts, she adds, and bring their emotions back into check. She also recommends deep breathing and soothing music.

Hilton-Eddy estimates that 10 to 15 per cent of students experience exam jitters. Some may even feel nauseous, faint or dizzy before an exam.

Tina Bouffet, a Grade 12 student at Toronto French School, says International Baccalaureate exam practice, for example, has improved her ability to take tests in stride. She also took one of the school's scheduling and study workshops, which taught her how to juggle her work and free time. "I probably should be feeling a lot more nervous, but it's been okay so far," she says.



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