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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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An (Easy!) Antidote to Test Anxiety

Choking on tests can lead to dashed college-admissions hopes and lost scholarships. But researchers [have now shown](#) that having people write about their anxiety, for a mere 10 minutes before the start of the test at hand, can eliminate the performance loss caused by stress.

In a study published in the January 14 issue of *Science*, college students were given a math test involving a subject they hadn't encountered before (but whose rules could be quickly learned) and then placed in a pressure-cooker situation: They were told that they'd win \$20 if they took a second test and increased their score. Moreover, their performance on the second test would determine whether *another* student got cash. (This second person, it was said, had already improved on Test No. 2). To boot, they were told they would be videotaped and their problem-solving methods analyzed by math teachers. Any one of these things might cause a moistening of the brow.

Before Test No. 2, these students either sat quietly for 10 minutes or wrote about their anxiety, exploring their feelings. The results? The non-writers "choked," the researchers wrote, and their scores dropped by 12%. Those who wrote about their anxiety, meanwhile, actually raised their scores by 4%.

Another, related, study showed that the topic of the writing exercise mattered: Students who wrote about a random subject rather than their own nervousness saw no score increase.

The researchers also brought their project into a real school, and studied freshmen taking biology. Students who had been shown to be highly test-anxious scored an average of B-plus on a biology test when they did the writing exercise. Anxious students who did not do so averaged B-minus.



Students pray for a successful result before taking the College Scholastic Ability Test, a standardized exam for college entrance, at a high school in Seoul, 15 November 2007. (Getty)

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