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.