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Students who wrote about anxiety over math test did better than others in study

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Got worries about a test? Write them off.

Your entire future depends on this exam. Score high, and you'll get into the college of your dreams. Score low, and . . . well, it's best not to think about that right now. And yet it's all you can think about. Your mind goes blank. You're choking.

You might have been better off writing down your feelings first, according to research by psychologists Gerardo Ramirez and Sian Beilock of the University of Chicago. Their [study](#), published online this month in *Science*, shows that students who spend just 10 minutes writing about their worries before a test score higher than those who write about something else or who write nothing.

With rewards such as college admissions and scholarships riding on one-shot exams, nervous test-takers are at a distinct disadvantage, says Beilock, the author of "[Choke](#)," a book about performance anxiety. "If we know the science behind test anxiety, we can adapt a short, punchy intervention to help students perform at their potential," he says.

In the study, the researchers asked college students to take a math exam covering material they had never seen. The students then were given a second exam and told that they would receive money if they passed. They were also told that they had a partner who had already done well and who would be let down if they failed, and that they would be videotaped while taking the test so that their teachers and friends could watch.

Before the second test, some students were asked to write about their emotions, and the others were told to sit quietly. The students who aired their anxieties showed an average 5 percent improvement on the second test; the others appeared to feel the pressure, and their scores dropped by 12 percent.

Apparently, it wasn't just the distraction of writing that helped. Students who were told to write about a past experience or about the material they thought would be on the test did worse than those who addressed their feelings.

Armed with these data, the researchers took the technique to the field: ninth-grade students taking final exams that could affect their college admissions. Here, too, participants who wrote about their feelings before the test performed significantly better than those who wrote about another topic. The students who had previously reported the most test anxiety showed the most improvement.

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