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## The write stuff for test anxiety

Students score higher after jotting down worries before a big exam

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**ENLARGE**

### WRITING OFF WORRIES

A brief written exercise enables student test-takers, such as these, to put aside distracting academic anxieties and score higher, a new study finds.

Science/AAAS

High school and college students go from choking to smoking on big tests by writing about their exam fears beforehand, a new study suggests.

In what amounts to a Heimlich maneuver for choking under pressure, writing down test-related worries for 10 minutes before taking a major exam appears to dislodge those concerns and clear the way for higher achievement, say psychologists Gerardo Ramirez and Sian Beilock, both of the University of Chicago.

Writing about unspoken fears of failure and related anxieties lets students reevaluate such concerns and keep them at bay during a test, Ramirez and Beilock propose in the Jan. 14 *Science*.

“One bout of writing about test anxiety can substantially increase students’ test scores and prevent the dreaded choke,” Beilock says.

Ramirez and Beilock provide the first evidence of people reaping immediate benefits from expressive writing, remarks psychologist James Pennebaker of the University of Texas at Austin. His earlier research linked writing about personal conflicts and traumas over several days at the start of a college semester to improved physical health and final grades by semester’s end.

Researchers have also found that depressed people who write about distressing personal experiences over several months ruminate

progressively less about melancholy topics.

It's unclear whether students plagued by test anxiety can repeatedly raise their test scores via expressive writing, Beilock notes.

Pennebaker agrees. "As with any novel intervention, there is a strong possibility that the effectiveness of the writing exercise diminishes over time," he says.

Over two consecutive school years at a Midwestern high school, Ramirez and Beilock had teachers randomly assign one of two writing exercises to a total of 106 ninth graders about to take final exams in biology. Each student spent 10 minutes writing thoughts and feelings about the upcoming exam or a description of a biology topic that they suspected wouldn't be on the exam.

On questionnaires administered six weeks before the final exam, 54 students had reported constant worries about taking, and potentially failing, tests.

Among test-anxious students, those who wrote about exam-related feelings scored an average of 6 percent higher on the final than those who wrote about biology topics. Expressive writers received a B+ average on the final, versus a B- for biology writers.

Worriers who wrote about their feelings scored as highly on the final as students who reported few or no concerns about tests. Anxious students had scored about 6 percent below relatively unworried peers on three biology midterm exams leading up to the final, a deficit erased by writing about test anxieties.

Neither writing exercise led to higher scores among students with few test concerns.

In a separate lab experiment, Ramirez and Beilock first gave low-pressure and then high-pressure math tests to 47 college students of comparable math ability. On low-pressure tests, students were told to do their best. On high-pressure tests, designed to inflate test anxiety, volunteers were told that their scores would determine how much money experimenters gave them and a partner.

Participants who spent 10 minutes writing their thoughts about a high-pressure test before taking it raised their scores substantially over what they achieved on the low-pressure test. But, compared with results of the low-pressure test, scores dropped markedly on the high-pressure test for students who wrote about another emotional event in their lives, or who wrote nothing