

Writing Can Help Avoid Choking Under Pressure  
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## Study Finds Many People Can Write Their Way to Test Success

Jasmin Sultana, 24, of Queens, N.Y., knows only too well what it means to choke under pressure.

The first time she took her driving test, tears welled up in her eyes and she could not see the road. She pulled over mid-test, stopped the car, and told the tester, "I just can't do this."

"Even though I was prepared for it, leading up to it I was really sweaty," said Sultana. "I started to feel nervous, and during the test I started crying."

The second and third time she took the test, Sultana could feel her stress level building. Again, she choked.

"I just couldn't concentrate," she said. "It became such a long process to pass this test."

Sultana was wrapping up her final college year before she got the nerve to try it again. This time she brought a friend along. Right before the test, her friend assured her there was nothing to worry about.

Sultana thought about failure, she told her friend. She thought about what her tester thought about her. She thought taking a deep breath to quell the anxiety won't work for her. But she also thought, "I've got to pass this thing." She didn't want to take this test again.

"Telling someone put things in perspective for me, that it's just a test that I've been prepared for," said Sultana, who went on to pass the test.

Letting out all of her fearful thoughts before test time may have done the trick, according to a new study published Thursday in the journal *Science*. The study suggests that simply writing about your anxiety just a few minutes before a high-stakes event can help you perform significantly better.

Researchers conducted four separate studies that focused on test-taking anxieties of high school and college students. Before giving the students a test, researchers assigned different groups of students with high performance anxiety to either write down their anxieties about taking the

upcoming test, write freely about any topic, or not write at all.

"I am afraid I am going to make a mistake," wrote one student in the expressive writing group.

"I just want to stop thinking about how I am going to fail," another student wrote.

The study found that those who wrote about their test anxiety in some cases received a whole grade letter higher than those who wrote about an unrelated event, or did not take the time to write.

"It's really a counterintuitive finding -- that dwelling on your worries can have a positive impact," said Sian Beilock, an associate professor in the department of psychology in The University of Chicago and co-author of the study.

### **Writing Your Fears Away**

Previous research suggests writing can relieve some types of stress. Beilock used that principle to find whether writing about anxieties would help students let go of their anxiety instead of bottling up their fears.

"One thing we've shown is that even the best students start to worry about performing well," said Beilock.

"Worrying eats up brain resources they could use to perform well," a physiological phenomenon Beilock explains in her book, "Choke."

In fact, 15 to 20 percent of students are considered test anxious, and test anxious student score 12 percentile points lower on average than their non-anxious peers, according to the American Test Anxieties Association.

It's no secret that stress can derail any performance, not just test taking. But the ultimate challenge many psychologists developing performance programs encounter is to find techniques that not only relieve anxiety but work to help a person succeed when the stakes are high.

"The reality is that there's not much out there that works," said Richard Driscoll, programs director for the American Test Anxieties Association and a psychologist at Westside Psychology in Knoxville, Tenn.

Clinical psychology theories show that journaling about traumatic experience that already took place helps ease a victim's anxiety. Research now suggests benefits to confronting at times baseless fears head on.

"This is a technique that doesn't require time or money, just a writing exercise," said Beilock. "So this will be something that is easy to implement in many educational programs anywhere."

While Driscoll said he found the idea of expressive writing before a performance "intriguing," he

said there is stronger research on techniques such as stretching, breathing, and positive thinking, and physical activity that can reduce performance anxiety.

"I think it ought to be repeated in study setting before implementing," said Driscoll.

While the study suggests a writing exercise may work for some students who tried it out for the first time, it's not clear whether this seemingly quick fix will work every time, said Aaron Ellington, a clinical psychologist at University Hospitals Case Medical Center in Cleveland, OH.

" Long term I would be curious as to more research being done as students become more aware that they're going to have these writing assignments that the initial benefit isn't going to be in some way counteracted," said Ellington.

But some including Sultana, who said the recommended techniques don't work well for her, may be looking to try something new, even if it might only provide short term benefits.

"I feel like writing down how I feel could help me," said Sultana, who recently began seeing a psychologist for her anxiety.

Sultana says the performance anxiety she felt before her driving test permeates to other important events in her life such as job interviews and presentations.

Even though Sultana scored the job she wanted at an international technology company, she said it would have helped if she confronted instead of panicking before her interview.

"Writing would probably put my anxieties into perspective," said Sultana. "And when I look back on what I thought and wrote would happen, it may all seem silly."