

Helping Students Beat Test Anxiety

Fear of failure can prevent students from showing what they know on big tests—but a 10-minute writing exercise can help.

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The Research Is In



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A rapid heartbeat. Sweaty palms. Clouded thoughts. For many students, the biggest obstacle to passing a test isn't what they know, but the anxiety they feel.

Stress and anxiety can wreak havoc on a student's ability to concentrate on

tests, leading to poor performance and, ultimately, fewer opportunities to succeed in school. A [new study](#) highlights an effective solution: Guide students to view stress differently—as a boost instead of a burden. Simple 10-minute writing exercises given just before a test helped students see stress as “a beneficial and energizing force” that could help them.

The writing exercises were most effective for disadvantaged students, who may be sensitive to situations that emphasize rank and status—by-products of high-stakes testing. Their wealthier peers may have access to more resources like tutors that can boost their chances of success in school, and in comparison students from low-income families may feel more pressure to do well because they have “less margin for error,” which raises the stakes of failure.

Psychologists Christopher Rozek, Gerardo Ramirez, Rachel Fine, and Sian Beilock followed 1,175 high school biology students for a year to study how stress affected their ability to pass major exams. They noticed that low-income students were disproportionately harmed by difficulty regulating test anxiety. These students experienced “worried thoughts about the possibility of failure” that became a self-fulfilling prophecy: Being stressed about failing increased the likelihood of failure. But 10-minute writing exercises that encouraged students to let go of negative thoughts, regulate their emotions, and reinterpret stress as a positive force helped them perform better.

In the study, two types of writing were assigned immediately before end-of-semester exams were taken:

- **Expressive writing.** Students were asked to write about their thoughts and feelings about the exam they were about to take. They were also asked to write about other times in their lives when they had experienced worried thoughts.
- **Stress reappraisal.** Students were asked to think about their symptoms of stress as helpful for test-taking. For example: “If you find

yourself feeling nervous or anxious while taking a test, think about how your body's responses can actually energize and help you." Students also read a passage that explained how psychological responses to stress—a faster heartbeat and heavy breathing, for example—help improve performance by increasing oxygen flow into the brain, boosting alertness.

Both types of exercises proved to be effective at boosting student achievement, especially that of low-income students. (Both writing prompts are [available online](#).) The achievement gap between low- and high-income students decreased by 29 percent, and the course failure rate for low-income students was cut in half, making this intervention a potentially valuable tool for increasing equity.

Stress Is Helpful, to a Degree

Stress isn't always bad. In a popular [TED talk](#), psychologist Kelly McGonigal explains that reframing stress can help people be more productive: "That pounding heart is preparing you for action. If you're breathing faster, it's no problem. It's getting more oxygen to your brain."

While chronic stress can cause [serious health problems](#), short-term stress can be beneficial, boosting attention and memory performance. In 1908, psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson conducted a simple experiment on mice that laid the foundation for understanding the role between stress and learning. They observed that for challenging tasks, a moderate amount of stress is ideal: Too little leads to apathy, but too much impairs performance.

Yerkes and Dodson's original experiments were flawed, but they opened up new areas of research into the relationship between stress and learning, including in humans. More recent research has [replicated their findings](#) under more rigorous experimental conditions, and a [2015 study](#) found that

low levels of the stress hormone cortisol enhance memory—and high levels impair it.

Why would stress be beneficial? Researchers hypothesize that it played a key role in [early humans' survival](#). It helped us not only identify threats but also take advantage of opportunities. We tend to think of stress as a reaction to negative events, and while this is often the case, stress does help sharpen our focus. Feeling nervous about meeting someone famous? The butterflies in your stomach before giving a presentation? Those feelings are telling you, "This is important, so pay attention."

Transforming Stress

In the classroom, test anxiety can be pervasive, affecting students' ability to perform at their full potential. But teachers can take a few steps to help students beat test anxiety:

Step 1: Recognize that tests measure more than just academic ability. They also measure how much test anxiety a student suffers from.

Step 2: Reframe stress. It's not a burden but a way of energizing the body. Consider how top performers, from athletes to musicians, deal with stress. NBA champion [Kobe Bryant has said](#), "Everything negative—pressure, challenges—is all an opportunity for me to rise."

Step 3: Before a major test, give students a short break to flush out negative thoughts. Writing exercises are effective, as the recent study shows, but so are [brain breaks](#), [mindfulness exercises](#), and [movement breaks](#).

All too often, students think to themselves, "This test is too hard, and I'll probably fail." But teachers can step in and encourage a positive mindset toward stress, instead leading students to think, "This test is really challenging, so I need to do my best."

The takeaway: Take 10 minutes before a test to help students view stress positively. While it's easy to have faith in the accuracy of tests, students' anxiety can prevent them from showing what they know.