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Observer

Anxious Test Taker?

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Test anxiety can make even the most prepared test-taker choke. But there may be hope. A recent study published in *Psychological Science*, shows that simply thinking about someone competent before a test can improve test scores for those with test anxiety.

In this study, Jonas W.B. Lang, of Maastricht University, and Jessica Lang, of Aachen University, set aside the emotional component of test anxiety— the general nervousness and physical symptoms like sweating. Past studies have found that emotional test anxiety does not actually have an effect on performance. Instead, the psychological scientists concentrated on cognitive test anxiety, the specific worry that you will not do well on a test. "The problem is if you think, 'Oh, my god, maybe I'll fail this test,' and then you look out of the window and you start to think about something else, you are not able to concentrate on the test" says Jonas Lang.

The Langs predicted that if people with test anxiety were primed with thoughts of competence, their performance would improve. In this study volunteers imagined a person who is very good at solving technical problems. The volunteers wrote down adjectives and abilities of the competent person they imagined right before solving a complex problem. The results showed that people with test anxiety performed better on the complex problem after concentrating on competence. "This proves that skill doesn't enter into the equation," Lang says. "People with test anxiety aren't anxious because they don't know anything, they're just anxious about the test. Priming made them do just as well as people without test anxiety."

So can you use this technique at school? Maybe, says Jonas Lang. While priming with competence worked for those with test anxiety, volunteers who did not have test anxiety did slightly worse if they were primed with competence. Jonas Lang hopes that future research will explore this result, as well as uncover whether priming still works if you know you're being primed.

Media coverage: *National Affairs* blog on Understanding Student Performance.

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Interesting article. While priming would seem to be beneficial at the time of a test, my research has found considerable problems with test preparation. Studying effectively becomes difficult, both, with the overt effects of anxiety (e.g., "I'll never pass", "I can't do this") and the more subtle behavioral affects (e.g., easy distraction from the task of studying). I've developed a modular treatment for academic anxiety, called MIND over MATR (Mindful Meditation for Anxiety and Test Readiness), combining mindfulness meditative practice & behavioral self-control for academic and test-related anxiety. In pilot trials, it seems to yield positive changes in perceived competence and reduced test anxiety (per the TAI). Happy to share.

by **Dave Castro-Blanco** on 2010-07-27 13:34:19 @ 2010-07-27 13:34:19

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