

Getting excited helps with performance anxiety more than trying to calm down, study finds

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People who tell themselves to get excited rather than trying to relax can improve their performance during anxiety-inducing activities such as public speaking and math tests, according to a study published by the American Psychological Association.

"Anxiety is incredibly pervasive. People have a very strong intuition that trying to calm down is the best way to cope with their anxiety, but that can be very difficult and ineffective," said study author Alison Wood Brooks, PhD, of Harvard Business School. "When people feel anxious and try to calm down, they are thinking about all the things that could go badly. When they are excited, they are thinking about how things could go well."

Several experiments conducted at Harvard University with college students and members of the local community showed that simple statements about excitement could improve performance during activities that triggered anxiety. The study was published online in APA's *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

In one experiment, 140 participants (63 men and 77 women) were told to prepare a persuasive public speech on why they would be good work partners. To increase anxiety, a researcher videotaped the speeches and said they would be judged by a committee. Before delivering the speech, participants were instructed to say "I am excited" or "I am calm." The

subjects who said they were excited gave longer speeches and were more persuasive, competent and relaxed than those who said they were calm, according to ratings by independent evaluators.

"The way we talk about our feelings has a strong influence on how we actually feel," said Brooks, an assistant professor of business administration at Harvard Business School.

In another experiment, 188 participants (80 men and 108 women), were given difficult math problems after they read "try to get excited" or "try to remain calm." A [control group](#) didn't read any statement. Participants in the excited group scored 8 percent higher on average than the calm group and the control group, and they reported feeling more confident about their math skills after the test.

In a trial involving karaoke, 113 participants (54 men and 59 women) were randomly assigned to say that they were anxious, excited, calm, angry or sad before singing a popular rock song on a [video game](#) console. A control group didn't make any statement. All of the [participants](#) monitored their heart rates using a pulse meter strapped onto a finger to measure their anxiety.

Participants who said they were excited scored an average of 80 percent on the song based on their pitch, rhythm and volume as measured by the video game's rating system. Those who said they were calm, angry or sad scored an average of 69 percent, compared to 53 percent for those who said they were anxious. Participants who said they were excited also reported feeling more excited and confident in their singing ability.

Since both anxiety and excitement are emotional states characterized by high arousal, it may be easier to view anxiety as excitement rather than trying to calm down to combat performance [anxiety](#), Brooks said.

"When you feel anxious, you're ruminating too much and focusing on potential threats," she said. "In those circumstances, people should try to focus on the potential opportunities. It really does pay to be positive, and people should say they are excited. Even if they don't believe it at first, saying 'I'm excited' out loud increases authentic feelings of excitement."

More information: "Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-Performance Anxiety as Excitement," Alison Wood Brooks, PhD, Harvard Business School; *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, online.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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