

REDUCING ANXIETY THROUGH WRITING

By Jane Leonhardt

Anxiety.

It's the most common mental disorder in the United States, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA).



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About 18 percent of adults have some kind of anxiety disorder and over a third of those adults suffer from their symptoms going untreated (ADAA).

Now, people with anxiety know that it's more than a feeling of nervousness or worry. Those feelings can be healthy and helpful in certain situations. In a TED Talk, Kelly McGonigal describes to us how we can make stress our friend by learning how to control it and react in certain ways, thus making our minds and bodies stronger, more prepared for what's to come.

However, anxiety is different. It consumes us. Activating our parasympathetic fight-or-flight symptoms, anxiety tells us to FLY. RUN. GET OUT OF THERE. HIDE.

How you ever had these feelings?

Deadlines, friendships, family, pets, money, school, work, the list goes on and *on*.

When someone asks you, "What are you so worried about?" It's hard to not scream in their face, "EVERYTHING!!"

It can feel absolutely impossible to make sense of your feelings of sheer panic and fear, no matter how trivial the subject may be to someone else, or even to yourself. You know it's not a huge deal, but something inside of you is convincing you that it is monumental.

Honestly, it almost makes more sense to ask people, "Why *aren't* you so worried?"

When the negative thoughts start swirling about in your head like that, and you're feeling the weight of everything at once, science shows that it's best to **write your thoughts down**.



Really!

It's scientifically proven that if you can take 5-15 min to write down your anxious thoughts in a cohesive

narrative, you can actually calm yourself down and improve your brain's function.

In 2011, the University of Chicago found that students, no matter how high their skill level is, tend to “choke” under pressure. A big test comes along that they've prepared and studied for to the best of their abilities. Yet, for some reason, their minds draw blanks and their test performance is sub-par (Ramirez & Beilock, 2011).

In Ramirez and Beilock's 2011 experiment, they found that if students took a short break after their studying and right before their test to write out their fears and worries, they actually performed better.

Our brains have three types of memory: working memory, short-term, and long-term. We know what short and long-term memories are, right? Pretty self-explanatory. Long-term memories are things we can recall such as our childhood addresses, our vacation abroad in college or our parent's birthdays. Short-term memories are things that have happened within the last few minutes: a recent phone call, the TV show you just watched, what you just ate.

Now, our *working memory* might be a little less familiar. Our working memories are memories that help us solve problems and organize our thoughts to be successful. One foot in front of the other when walking, the format for the paper we're typing, the recipe we're following.

When we are anxious, our working memory gets all clogged up. It doesn't

have the capacity for all of our worries and fears AND our problem-solving abilities.

Have you ever been so anxious that you forget where you're going? Or you lock your keys in your car? Or leave the house without the coffee that you just made?

Your brain is too busy trying to process all of the problems that your anxiety is creating that it can't execute the tasks that it needs to properly. Your anxiety is fighting your working memory for space (Ramirez & Beilock, 2011).

If you can find it in your long-term memory to recall this method the next time you are overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety -- or perhaps utilize this method once or twice a day, every day -- you might be able to help yourself organize your thoughts and calm yourself down.

<https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>

Cowan N. (2008). What are the differences between long-term, short-term, and working memory?. *Progress in brain research*, 169, 323-38.

Ramirez, G., Beilock, L. S., (2011). Writing About Testing Worries Boosts Exam Performance In Classroom. *Science*, 331(6014), 211-213