Can Three Words Turn Anxiety Into Success?

A simple technique called "anxious reappraisal" might help people channel nervous jitters into improved performance.

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I am so excited for this severe threat looming on the horizon.

I just can't wait to learn how I will fail to live up to my own expectations.

I lie awake, tight-chested, at 3 a.m., just really looking forward to what fresh hell that meeting will be about.

Don't mind me, I'm just trying out a cognitive trick that's supposed to help with anxiety. It's called "anxiety reappraisal," and it boils down to telling yourself that you feel excited whenever you feel nervous. It sounds stupidly simple, but it's proven effective in a variety of studies and settings.

It's also counterintuitive: When most people feel anxious, they likely tell themselves to just relax. "When asked, 'how do you feel about your upcoming speech?', most people will say, 'I'm so nervous, I'm trying to calm down,'" said Alison Wood Brooks, a professor at Harvard Business School who has studied the phenomenon. She cites the ubiquitous "Keep Calm and Carry On" posters as partial evidence.

But that might be precisely the wrong advice, she said. Instead, the slogan should be more like, "Get Amped and Don't Screw Up."

That's because anxiety and excitement are both aroused emotions. In both, the heart beats faster, cortisol surges, and the body prepares for action. In other words, they're "arousal congruent." The only difference is that excitement is a positive emotion, focused on all the ways something could go well.

Calmness is also positive, meanwhile, but it's also low on arousal. For most people, it takes less effort for the brain to jump from charged-up, negative feelings to charged-up, positive ones, Brooks said, than it would to get from charged-up and negative to positive and chill. In other words, its easier to convince yourself to be excited than calm when you're anxious.

Brooks discovered this for herself by performing a series of three experiments fora study published in 2014. After rounding up her participants, she surprised them with a series of tasks that most people find at least a little bit anxiety-inducing.

First, they were asked to sing the song "Don't Stop Believin" by the band Journey in front of the group. ("I chose 'Don't Stop Believin' as the target song because it can be performed easily in three different octaves," Brooks wrote. It "was also the 21st most downloaded song in iTunes history and tends to be extremely familiar to English speakers.")

The participants were then told to either say "I am anxious," "I am excited," or nothing before they broke into song. The "excited" participants not only felt more excited, and they also sang better, according to a computerized measurement of volume and pitch. Their *on-and-on-and-ons* were just more, well, on—perhaps because the participants themselves were.

The same was true of a speech test. When asked to give a two-minute speech on camera, the excited participants spoke longer and were seen as more persuasive, confident, and persistent. Then came a math test, in which the excited participants similarly outperformed a group that was told to remain calm.

Surprisingly, though, the excitement reappraisal didn't actually make the subjects less anxious, nor did it lower their heart rate. That's because the underlying anxiety was the same—it was just reframed as excitement.

The way this works, Brooks said, is by putting people in an "opportunity mindset," with a focus on all the good things that can happen if you do well, as opposed to a "threat mindset," which dwells on all the consequences of performing poorly.

In 2010, the University of Rochester's Jeremy Jamieson similarly found that reframing anxiety as a positive thing could help people do better on the math section of the GRE standardized test. In his study, subjects were just told that anxiety could improve performance—they didn't even have to say that they were excited.

And another study published last year asked people to list goals they had that were in conflict with one another. (So, for example, training for a marathon and finishing an ambitious project.) Some participants were asked to say the phrase "I am excited" out loud to themselves three times, while others just said their names. Those who reappraised their anxiety as excitement felt they had more time on their hands to complete their goals.

I suggested to Brooks that this trick might be harder than it seems. Say you're not really the kind of person who goes around proclaiming her enthusiasm for things. And say you have a lot of anxiety related to your job. And say that job involves reading a lot of psychology papers, so you kind of already know all the anxiety-alleviation tricks, and you have been known to try them all, fruitlessly, as you stress-eat Skinny Cow ice cream late at night. I'm asking for a friend.

The more my friend tries it, Brooks said, the easier it might become for her. She also recommends making a list of all the ways an upcoming, anxiety-inducing task could go well, and how it might benefit you. Who will be in the audience for that major speech you give? How will that change your life for the better?

She also said the technique might not be ideal for people whose success on a stressful task requires fine motor control. Surgeons, for example, are probably best off if they're not giddy bundles of nerves when they operate. Most everyone else facing dread, though, should at least give it a shot.