# Cognitive Reappraisal: Can Rethinking Nerves Help You?

Name Date Class

## Reading

1 You sit down, turn over the exam paper, and your body reacts before your mind does. Your heart is **pounding**, your palms are damp, and your stomach feels tied in knots. Most of us call this anxiety and assume it will ruin our performance. But some psychologists ask a different question: what if the meaning we give these signals matters as much as the signals themselves? The idea is called **cognitive reappraisal**. A short Instagram reel by a sports psychiatrist describes one well-known experiment about it, and that experiment deserves a closer look.

2 Reappraisal means changing how you interpret a situation so that its emotional effect changes too. It is different from telling yourself to calm down, because the feeling stays. What changes is the story you attach to it. A racing heart can mean danger, or it can mean that your body is **gearing up** for something that matters. The sensation is the same in both cases. Whether it helps or hurts may depend partly on which story you believe.

3 In 2010, researchers at Harvard University, including the psychologist Jeremy Jamieson, tested this idea on students preparing for the GRE, a **standardized** test used for entry to graduate school. Before a practice test in the laboratory, all the students heard the same instructions. Some also read one extra paragraph. It said that, **contrary to popular belief**, the **arousal** that comes with feeling anxious does not harm performance on tests like this and may even help. If you notice you are nervous, it added, remind yourself that your body may be helping you do well. The other students did not read this paragraph. On the practice math section, the students who read it scored about 55 points higher. There was no difference on the verbal section.

4 The **follow-up** is what makes the study interesting. One to three months later, the students who had taken the real exam brought in their official score reports. Those who had read the paragraph still led on math, by about 64 points. Two **caveats** apply. Fewer than half of the volunteers took the real test within the time allowed, so the final comparison involved fewer than thirty students, and the result is **tentative**. The researchers also could not say exactly how the effect worked. The paragraph might have changed how students prepared, or students might simply have remembered it on test day.

5 What happened inside the body is the surprising part. Many people assume the paragraph worked by calming students down. If that were true, the saliva samples would show less arousal in the group that read it. In fact, they showed more. A **marker** of the body's alert system rose in that group, and among those students, bigger rises tended to go with better math scores. The physical reaction was still there. It seems to have been read as energy rather than as a warning.

6 Other research points in the same direction. In experiments by a business school researcher, people who told themselves they were excited, or read a note telling them to get excited, tended to do better at karaoke singing, public speaking, and hard math problems than people who tried to calm down. Anxiety and excitement are both high-energy states, so switching from one to the other may be easier than switching the energy off. In Switzerland, a trial with more than 200 medical students found that a seven-minute video about the usefulness of stress responses improved their **nonverbal** communication, such as posture and eye contact, during a **simulated** conversation in which they had to give bad news to an actor playing a patient. It did not improve their choice of words.

7 The evidence is encouraging but not **overwhelming**. A review of 35 studies of similar interventions found a small average benefit for performance, and a 2026 study across 12 science courses at seven US colleges and universities found no effect on test anxiety or exam results. If reappraisal were a complete **remedy** for test anxiety, far fewer people would dread exams. It does not replace preparation, and if anxiety regularly stops you from sleeping, studying, or sitting exams, a doctor or counselor can offer more help. For many people, though, exam nerves are a **nuisance** rather than a medical problem, and trying reappraisal costs nothing. Notice the sensations, name them, and tell yourself that your body is getting ready. If your heart were pounding before an important exam, what would you tell yourself?

## Vocabulary Matching

*Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **pounding** | _____ | **A** | changing the meaning you give to a situation |
| 2 | **cognitive reappraisal** | _____ | **B** | so strong and clear that it is hard to doubt |
| 3 | **gearing up** | _____ | **C** | a way of curing or solving a problem |
| 4 | **standardized** | _____ | **D** | not final and open to later change |
| 5 | **contrary to popular belief** | _____ | **E** | warnings that a claim has some limits |
| 6 | **arousal** | _____ | **F** | something annoying that is not serious |
| 7 | **follow-up** | _____ | **G** | the opposite of what most people think |
| 8 | **caveats** | _____ | **H** | getting ready for something demanding |
| 9 | **tentative** | _____ | **I** | a later check made to see what happened next |
| 10 | **marker** | _____ | **J** | expressed without words, such as by gestures |
| 11 | **nonverbal** | _____ | **K** | made to copy a real situation for practice |
| 12 | **simulated** | _____ | **L** | made the same in format and rules for everyone |
| 13 | **overwhelming** | _____ | **M** | a state of being physically alert and energized |
| 14 | **remedy** | _____ | **N** | beating very hard and very fast |
| 15 | **nuisance** | _____ | **O** | a measurable sign of a process or condition |

## Fill in the Blank

*Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.*

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **arousal** | **caveats** | **cognitive reappraisal** | **contrary to popular belief** | **follow-up** | **gearing up** | **marker** |
| **nonverbal** | **overwhelming** | **pounding** | **remedy** | **simulated** | **standardized** | **tentative** |

1 After the final question, he could feel his pulse _____ in his ears.

2 Many therapists teach _____ , a way of changing the meaning you give to a feeling.

3 The whole city was _____ for the marathon.

4 Fast breathing and a racing pulse are signs of high physical _____ .

5 Students in many countries take a _____ test at the end of secondary school.

6 _____ , bats are not blind.

7 The scientists published a _____ study to see how the patients were doing a year later.

8 The results look good, but the authors list several _____ about the small sample.

9 Because the data are still incomplete, the conclusion is only _____ .

10 A high level of this chemical is a _____ of infection in the blood.

11 Smiling and nodding are examples of _____ communication.

12 The pilots practiced the emergency in a _____ cockpit on the ground.

13 The evidence against him was _____ , so the case ended quickly.

14 Rest and plenty of water are a simple _____ for a mild headache.

## Comprehension Questions

*Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.*

1 Which physical signs of nervousness does the reading mention, and how do most people interpret them?

2 How is reappraisal different from telling yourself to calm down?

3 In the 2010 experiment, what did some students read that the other students did not?

4 What were the results on the practice test and on the real GRE, and how did math differ from verbal?

5 Why does the writer call the result tentative? What could the researchers not explain?

6 Why do the saliva results challenge the idea that the paragraph worked by calming students down?

7 According to the reading, why might switching from anxiety to excitement be easier than trying to calm down?

8 What does the Swiss trial add to the discussion, and what limit did it find?

9 The writer says the evidence is "encouraging but not overwhelming." Which details in the last paragraph support each half of that statement?

**IELTS-Style Questions**

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"The students who read the extra paragraph felt less nervous during the real GRE."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that reappraisal can replace preparation and professional help."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with a question about your own heart pounding before an exam? Is the aim to prove that the technique works, to invite you to test it yourself, or something else?

## True or False

*Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.*

1 **T / F** The writer says some psychologists think the meaning we give physical signals may matter.

2 **T / F** Reappraisal means making the physical feeling disappear.

3 **T / F** Every student in the 2010 experiment read the extra paragraph.

4 **T / F** The students who read the paragraph scored higher on the practice math section.

5 **T / F** The students who read the paragraph scored higher on the practice verbal section.

6 **T / F** The final comparison on the real exam involved fewer than thirty students.

7 **T / F** The researchers showed exactly how the paragraph improved the scores.

8 **T / F** The saliva samples showed less arousal in the group that read the paragraph.

9 **T / F** The Swiss trial found a benefit for nonverbal communication.

10 **T / F** A review of 35 studies found a small average benefit for performance.

## Discussion Questions

*Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.*

1 How do you usually feel just before an important exam, interview, or presentation?

2 Which physical signs of nervousness do you notice most in yourself?

3 What do you usually do to deal with nerves? Does it work?

4 Have you ever felt very nervous and then done better than you expected? What happened?

5 Would you rather try to calm down or try to get excited before a big performance? Why?

6 What do you say to yourself in your head before something difficult? Is it helpful?

7 Have you ever helped someone else feel less nervous? What did you say or do?

8 Do people in your country talk openly about exam nerves, or is it kept private? Why do you think that is?

9 Would it matter who tells students that nerves can help: a teacher, a classmate, a doctor, or an app? Why?

10 Why might a short message work for some people but not for others?

11 The 2010 study was small, and many volunteers did not take the real test. How much weight would you give a result like this, and what would you want to see before trusting it?

12 If reappraisal changes only the meaning of a feeling and not the feeling itself, is it honest thinking or a kind of self-deception?

13 Should schools teach reappraisal alongside study skills? What risks, if any, could there be?

14 When does anxiety stop being a normal reaction and become a health problem, and who should decide?

**Language Focus: Second Conditional**

The second conditional talks about an imaginary or unlikely situation in the present or future, or about something the speaker thinks is not true. The if-clause uses a past form (were is common for every person), and the main clause uses would plus the base verb.

**In the reading:**

- "If that **were** true, the saliva samples **would show** less arousal in the group that read it."
- "If reappraisal **were** a complete remedy for test anxiety, far fewer people **would dread** exams."
- "If your heart **were** pounding before an important exam, what **would** you tell yourself?"

**Practice:** Finish this sentence with an imaginary situation and a result: *"If I could change one thing about how I feel before exams, I…"*

**Activities and speed challenge**
englishbridges.com/lessons/cognitive-reappraisal

**Notes**