

Math Anxiety

Do you . . .

- feel HELPLESS doing your homework?
- feel AFRAID to ask questions in class?
- AVOID being called on?
- PANIC and freeze while taking math tests?
- **think that it's HOPELESS - you just don't get math, never will, so there's no sense even trying?**

The Truth

Imagine a basketball player working hard on the court—running, blocking, jumping, shooting. She's going to get sweaty, thirsty, and hot—of course. But suppose she didn't know it was normal for her pulse to race, her body to perspire, and her throat to crave water. These normal reactions would seem awfully scary, and she might misinterpret them to believe that maybe she doesn't belong in sports, after all!

Very few math students know what to expect when they're learning math. The most destructive and most prevalent myth is that either math comes easily or it doesn't, that you have it or you don't, and that struggling in math is a sign that you don't have what it takes. Students get the message that math is supposed to come easily. When it doesn't—which it won't—most students feel dumb and inadequate, convinced they should give up.

It is startling how few students know that learning math means working hard—and thinking hard. Most students believe that succeeding in math has nothing to do with thinking and everything to do with inborn ability.

This misconception about math—that the gifted students just get it and the rest of us don't really belong—is the root of math anxiety. Believing this misconception, when students come to the parts of math that require a struggle to understand—and that time comes for every one of us—instead of plunging in and grappling, they feel anxious and inadequate.

Let them know that math is supposed to be hard—that it hard for everyone! Being smart doesn't mean it's easy, any more than being Michael Jordan means you don't sweat when you play basketball.

Find the smartest, biggest mind you know. Math is bigger. *“Don't fret over your troubles in math,”* Albert Einstein wrote, *“I assure you mine are even greater.”*

Everyone struggles with math.

Overcoming Math Anxiety

The real success in math is not determined by getting the right answer, but what you do when you don't know the right answer.

- Overcome negative self-talk.
- Consider math a foreign language—it must be practiced.
- Learn to read math. Use your math book as more than a repository of homework problems. An explanation in a text can clear up confusion. Learn to read math slowly, phrase by phrase, and often read it more than once to really get it.
- Review and reinforce previously learned concepts.
- Take time to struggle, without feeling a need to rush or perform and then . . .
- Ask your teacher for help the same day (or day after) you get stuck.
- Focus on thinking through a problem, not just finding the answer or finishing the assignment.

Don't panic! Feeling nervous about math is very common. But don't let it prevent you from using your ability to think and reason! Mathematics can develop this ability like nothing else can. Conversely, the more we use this ability, the better we do in math. It is a strong circle of success.

When we focus on the bigger picture of *learning*, rather than the narrow picture of *performing*, math anxiety often diminishes. Then students are free to let their minds carry them into and through this powerful subject.

Math's greatest value is not that [students] learn how to work with numbers, but that they learn to work with their minds.

Information taken from ENC Focus issue: Math Anxiety

www.enc.org

<http://www.enc.org/features/focus/archive/mathanxiety/document.shtm?input=FOC-003452-index>

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