

Maths Anxiety

What is maths anxiety?

Many pupils may claim not to enjoy maths lessons but maths anxiety is more than a dislike of the subject or a reluctance to engage. It is an overwhelming, physiological response when confronted with a mathematical task. According to the Maths Anxiety Trust, maths anxiety is defined as

“...a negative emotional reaction to mathematics, leading to varying degrees of helplessness, panic and mental disorganisation that arises among some people when faced with a mathematical problem.”

People of all ages can experience maths anxiety due to past experience and attitudes but it is worth noting that girls are more likely to experience maths anxiety than boys. It is likely that if a child experiences maths anxiety they are more likely to perform poorly....and then if a child performs poorly they are likely to experience further anxiety.

How do I know if my child is experiencing maths anxiety?

If your child seems to be struggling with their maths work or is getting overly upset when faced with a mathematical task, look to see if they are displaying any of these behaviours.

Panic during tests or when called on to answer questions – the maths lesson becomes a source of stress especially if they are asked to contribute in class or if they have to take a test.

A feeling of permanency – the pupil believes they are bad at maths and will never be able to understand it. This may lead to them giving up or not attempting questions.

Unusual nervousness when doing or thinking about math



Passive behaviour – an unwillingness to try or even think about the problem

Lack of confidence – the pupil believes that they are unable to answer any maths questions before they have even seen them.

A feeling of being alone – the child believes that they are the only one not capable of doing the problem

What can cause maths anxiety?

Whilst many pupils may be able to manage the situations below and not be affected, for some pupils these situations may trigger anxiety. Major causes of math anxiety include:

The pressure caused by time limits (particularly in tests)

Sometimes deadlines or working under timed conditions can impact on students making them feel anxious. This anxiety can lead to them forgetting concepts that they would normally remember.

Previous negative experiences

Where a child has had a negative experience in maths or a succession of what they perceive as failures, they may carry this feeling into any future maths lessons, believing that they cannot do maths before they are even given a task.

Influence of teachers

Students can pick up on their teacher's feelings about maths. Usually, if a teacher is excited about maths, pupils may pick up on this and develop more positive attitudes. Equally, if a teacher has experienced maths anxiety themselves or does not enjoy the subject, pupils may pick up on these negative feelings.

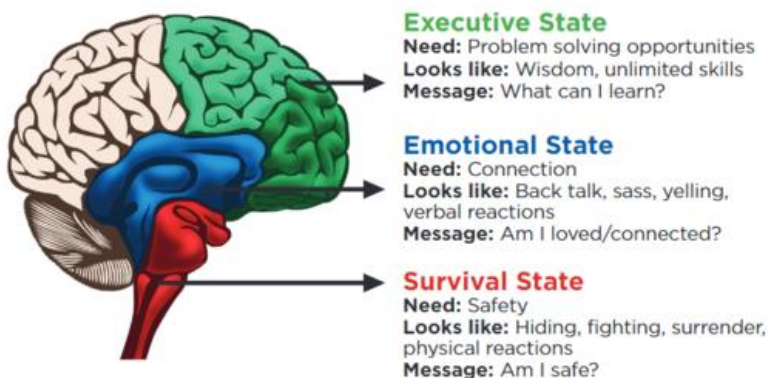
The fear of public embarrassment

If a pupil has experienced being embarrassed in front of peers for not knowing an answer or being laughed at for getting an answer incorrect, this may make their anxiety worse

Influence of parents

As with teachers, children will pick up the feelings and attitudes of their parents about maths. If a parent has had negative experiences and tries to comfort their child by saying "Don't worry, I was never any good at maths", this can be unhelpful as the child may feel that they don't need to try any more leading to them becoming further behind and more

Why does my child feel like this?



In a very simple way, when a child experiences anxiety the brain recognises the situation as being unsafe. The part of the brain focusing on survival is prioritised and the 'fight, flight or freeze' reactions surface. Other aspects of the brain including those that support learning shut down and cannot come back 'online' until the child is in a calm state of mind. If the child remains in an anxious state for the whole of the lesson, it is unlikely they will learn.