

# Math from the Street—Math Anxiety

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## What is math anxiety?

What do we mean when we talk about “math anxiety”? As the name suggests, it involves feeling anxious when learning and using math. It affects people in different ways, but, at worst, it causes stress and makes them sick. Math anxiety is real, and not “just” in people’s imaginations. The physical symptoms include nausea, heart palpitations, and increased blood pressure. There can also be psychological effects, ranging from negative feelings and low self-confidence to panic and memory loss.

Tests and exams have always been stressful for students, but math tests are only one source of math anxiety. Anyone...parents and students, and even teachers can become anxious about math in everyday situations as well as at school. The exact cause of math anxiety isn’t known, but many in the field believe the way math is taught can play a role. Emphasizing drills and memorization instead of understanding how and why numbers affect our world can contribute to anxiety. People with math anxiety often try to avoid math altogether, but math and numbers are so common that avoiding them can cause extra stress and make the anxiety worse.

## What can I do about math anxiety?

You don’t need natural ability with math to overcome math anxiety. There are many ways to become more comfortable with math.

### Whether you are a teen or a parent:

- Take math anxiety seriously.
- Talk about it.
- Remember that practice, and even some struggling, are part of learning.
- Stay positive!

### If you are a parent with math anxiety:

- Most children, including teens, follow their parents’ examples. Encourage your teen to have a positive attitude about improving math skills.
- Remember that you don’t have to be a math expert to help your teen with math!

### If you suspect your teen has math anxiety:

- Reassurance is important. Let them know it is OK to make mistakes and not know the answers right away.
- Encourage them to ask questions and take extra time with math homework.
- If they get stuck, suggest problem-solving steps to take, such as checking math websites, calling a friend, and talking to teachers. Offer to talk with the teacher as well.

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- Consider a tutor. Depending on a student’s learning style, one-on-one instruction can boost confidence and be more effective than learning in a group setting.

## Learn more about math anxiety:

- **Parent engagement resource.** [http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parent\\_engagement-math/en/](http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parent_engagement-math/en/). “**Inspiring Your Child to Learn and Love Math.**” CODE.
- **Research.** <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED530770>. “**Examining Mathematics Anxiety in Elementary Classroom Teachers.**” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Connecticut. Rachel R. McAnallen.
- **Media article.** <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/waterloo-ontario-math-scores-learning-school-1.3968653>. “**Attitudes' key to improving Ontario math scores, says expert.**” CBC.
- **Book.** *What's Math Got to Do with It?: How Teachers and Parents Can Transform Mathematics Learning and Inspire Success.* Jo Boaler.

