Math Phobia Encyclopedia Article

Math Phobia

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Math Phobia

Math phobia, which is exhibited by many students, is the persistent, illogical, intense fear of not succeeding in math. It is the belief that one is unable to handle the difficulty associated with learning math. Many people incorrectly assume that math phobia and an inability to be successful in mathematics are inherited from one's parents. Several legitimate factors contribute to, and increase the severity of, this perception. For instance, gender and ethnic backgrounds are not determining factors in mathematical competence, but peers' and teachers' attitudes toward gender and ethnicity may increase or decrease one's confidence in mathematical skills. The methods used to teach mathematics skills may affect whether a student feels successful and develops mathematical self-confidence. Finally, family and peer attitudes may positively or negatively influence students' attitudes toward mathematics, which in turn affect their levels of confidence.

Unless someone is diagnosed with a specific learning disability associated with processing numbers or learning intuitive concepts, math phobia is not a permanent condition. Math phobia can be overcome with the patience of an experienced and enthusiastic teacher, parent, coach, or therapist. Once a person gains even minimal amounts of success with mathematical concepts, the anxiety usually abates. Many teachers and other people concerned with the issue agree with Vanessa Stuart who writes: "My own hypothesis is that mathematics is like a sport: 90 percent mental--one's mathematics confidence--and 10 percent physical--one's mathematics competence in performing mathematical skills."