
When Maths Creates Anxiety

How school experiences can shape fear around numbers

Maths anxiety is more than disliking numbers. It can be a strong emotional and physical reaction that appears when you are asked to calculate, estimate, read a bill, check change, complete a form, sit a test or answer quickly in front of someone else. Your mind may suddenly go blank even when you have used the same skill before. You might feel heat, tension, nausea, panic, embarrassment or an urgent wish to escape. These reactions can make ordinary tasks feel like tests of your intelligence or worth.

The difficulty is real, but it is not a verdict on you

Anxiety uses attention and working memory - the mental space needed to hold numbers, remember steps and check an answer. When that space is filled with threat, self-criticism or memories of being exposed, performance can drop. The struggle you experience under pressure does not show the full extent of what you understand or could learn with calmer conditions and suitable support.

For many adults, the fear began at school. Being made to answer at the board, timed tests, public marking, ability groups, repeated failure, impatient teaching, teasing or comments such as “you should know this by now” can connect numbers with humiliation. If you already needed more processing time, different explanations or support for dyscalculia, ADHD or another learning difference, repeated misunderstanding may have taught you that asking for help was dangerous.

Men can carry an extra expectation to appear capable, independent and financially confident. Not understanding a calculation may therefore feel like something that must be hidden. Avoidance protects you from immediate embarrassment, but it can also prevent corrective experiences and strengthen the belief that numbers are unmanageable. This guide is about reducing shame, creating safer conditions and developing workable confidence rather than forcing yourself to become a different person.

What happens when numbers feel threatening

When a maths task resembles an earlier experience of failure or judgement, the nervous system may treat it as a threat. Your heart rate can rise, breathing may become shallow and attention narrows. The mind starts monitoring for mistakes: “Everyone will see I am stupid,” “I will get this wrong,” or “I should be able to do this.” That monitoring competes with the task itself. Losing your place or forgetting a step then seems to confirm the fear, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.

The cycle often follows a recognisable pattern: a number-based demand appears; the body becomes alert; self-critical predictions arrive; working memory becomes less available; you rush, freeze or avoid; and short-term relief is followed by more shame. Understanding this pattern matters because it shows several places where change is possible. You can slow the body, externalise the steps, change the conditions, use tools and approach the task in smaller doses.

A two-minute reset before a number task

Put both feet on the floor and look around the room. Breathe out a little longer than you breathe in, without forcing it. Name the exact task: "I am checking one bill," not "I am terrible with money." Write down every number instead of holding it in your head. Cover information you do not need yet. Decide what tool, person or extra time would make the next step easier.

Maths anxiety, dyscalculia and gaps in learning

Maths anxiety and dyscalculia are not the same, although they can occur together. Maths anxiety describes fear, tension or distress around numerical tasks. Dyscalculia is a specific learning difficulty affecting the understanding and processing of numbers and mathematical information. A person with dyscalculia may have persistent difficulty with number sense, quantities, sequences, calculation facts, time, money or spatial aspects of maths. Anxiety can worsen these difficulties, while years of unexplained difficulty can understandably create anxiety.

Some difficulties may also reflect missed teaching, disrupted schooling, ADHD-related working-memory demands, language, visual or processing needs, or a teaching method that never fitted. This guide cannot diagnose the cause. A specialist assessment can be useful when difficulties are persistent and affect education, work or daily life, but you do not need to wait for a label before using clearer instructions, calculators, written steps and extra time.

How school experiences can remain active in adult life

School may have taught you that speed equals intelligence. In adult life, this can lead to rushing at tills, pretending to understand figures in meetings, avoiding promotions, delaying bills or allowing someone else to control all financial tasks. You may compare yourself with people who calculate mentally and overlook your own strengths in practical problem-solving, communication, creativity, care, persistence or technical work. The old classroom can remain present even when nobody is actually testing you.

A present-day task can also carry several layers at once. Completing a timesheet is not only about hours; it may stir fear of authority and being caught out. Reading a payslip can connect with financial anxiety. Applying for a course can revive disappointment about GCSE Maths. Separating the practical task from the old meaning reduces its emotional weight: "This form requires support" is more accurate and useful than "This proves I cannot progress."

Replace the school rule

Old rule: "If I cannot do it quickly in my head, I am not intelligent." More accurate rule: "Accuracy, understanding and knowing how to use tools matter more than speed." Old rule: "Needing help is cheating." More accurate rule: "Adults routinely use calculators, spreadsheets, written procedures, colleagues and specialist advice."

Practical ways to make numbers more manageable

Begin by reducing unnecessary mental load. Use a calculator without apology, keep a written template for repeated calculations and write one operation per line. Use squared paper to keep columns aligned, highlight decimal points and label units such as pounds, hours or kilometres. Read the question twice, circle what is being asked and cross out information that is not needed. Estimate the likely size of an answer first so you can notice obvious errors.

For money, automate regular bills where safe, use banking alerts, separate essential spending into a dedicated account or pot, and schedule a short weekly check rather than waiting until anxiety becomes urgent. For time, use digital reminders, visual timers and journey-planning tools. At work,

ask for written instructions, examples of a completed task, permission to use a calculator or spreadsheet, fewer interruptions, additional checking time and a second check for high-risk figures.

Checking is most effective when it follows a consistent routine. Ask: Have I copied every number correctly? Are the units the same? Is the decimal point in the right place? Does the answer look roughly sensible? Can I calculate it in a second way or ask someone to confirm it? A routine turns checking into a professional habit rather than evidence that you are incapable.

Building confidence without recreating the classroom

Confidence usually grows after repeated experiences of being able to cope; it rarely arrives first. Choose one useful task at a level that creates mild discomfort rather than panic. Practise privately, without a timer, with tools available. Stop while you still feel in control, record what worked and repeat the same level before increasing difficulty. The aim is not a dramatic test of courage. It is to teach your nervous system that a number task can be approached, supported and completed.

A graded confidence ladder

Choose one real-life goal, such as checking a receipt. Step 1 might be looking at a receipt while calm. Step 2 could be identifying the total and date. Step 3 could be checking one item with a calculator. Step 4 might be doing the same in a quiet shop. Rate distress from 0 to 10 before and after. If it rises above a manageable level, make the step smaller rather than judging yourself.

Support at work and in learning

You are allowed to ask what competence is genuinely required and how it will be assessed. Some roles or courses require specific qualifications, but a missing GCSE Maths result does not describe every ability or close every route. Depending on the setting, alternatives may include Functional Skills, an equivalent qualification, a supported course, an apprenticeship pathway, recognition of prior learning or reasonable adjustments. Check the exact entry criteria with the provider instead of assuming the answer will be no.

If a learning difficulty has a substantial and long-term effect on ordinary activities, UK equality law may be relevant. Reasonable adjustments are individual and depend on the role or course; they do not remove essential requirements. Examples could include assistive technology, written procedures, a quieter workspace, extra time for training or assessments, and an agreed checking process. Access to Work may also provide practical workplace support in eligible circumstances. An employer, education provider, union, disability adviser or careers service can help clarify the available route.

A useful request is specific and connected to the task: “When figures are explained verbally, I lose the sequence. Could I have the steps in writing and use a calculator?” You do not need to present yourself as helpless. You are identifying the condition in which you can produce reliable work.

My maths-anxiety map

Situation	Thought/body response	Support or next step
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

My practical plan

The number situation I most want to make easier is:

The tool or adjustment I will use is:

The smallest practice step I can repeat is:

The person or service I can ask for help is:

A personal reflection

Think about the first times numbers began to feel unsafe. What happened around you, and what did you start believing about yourself? Then consider the evidence that the belief leaves out. You may have managed wages, travel, shopping, cooking, work targets, games, measurements or practical problems in ways that were never called maths. Your difficulties deserve honest recognition, but they are not the complete story of your intelligence, value or future.

A message from Maggie

If maths has made you feel embarrassed, behind or less capable, I want you to know that fear can hide ability. You may have learned under pressure, without the explanation, patience or support you needed. You are not required to prove yourself by doing everything mentally or quickly. Using a calculator, asking for written steps and taking more time are sensible ways of looking after yourself and completing a task well. We can respect what has been difficult while still making room for progress.

When to seek more support

Consider speaking with a GP or mental health professional if anxiety around numbers is part of wider panic, persistent low mood, severe avoidance or distress that interferes with daily life. A qualified specialist can advise about assessment for dyscalculia or related learning needs. Careers advisers, education providers and workplace disability services can help you explore qualifications and adjustments. Choose support that is curious about both the practical difficulty and the experiences that shaped the fear.

Books and reliable UK information

Overcoming Math Anxiety by Sheila Tobias - a foundational exploration of how fear and beliefs affect maths learning.

Mathematical Mindsets by Jo Boaler - ideas about learning, mistakes and developing mathematical understanding.

The Dyscalculia Solution by Jane Emerson and Patricia Babbie - practical approaches to understanding numerical difficulties.

NHS Every Mind Matters: anxiety and practical mental wellbeing guidance - <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/>

British Dyslexia Association: dyscalculia information - <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyscalculia>

GOV.UK: reasonable adjustments for workers - <https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers>

GOV.UK: Access to Work - <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

National Careers Service: careers information and advice - <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/>

This resource is educational. It does not diagnose dyscalculia, replace an individual assessment or provide legal, financial or clinical advice. Entry requirements, funding and adjustments vary, so confirm them with the relevant provider or employer.