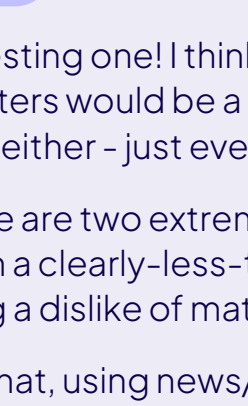
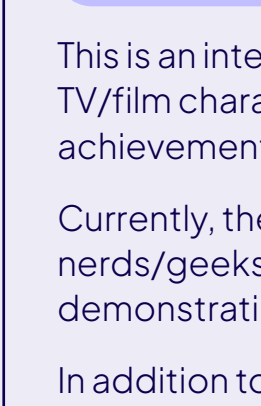
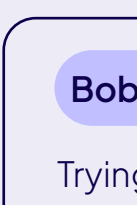


Maths Anxiety Q&A

with **Dr Thomas Hunt** and **Bobby Seagull**



Following the Maths Anxiety Webinar in October 2025, **Dr Thomas Hunt** and **Bobby Seagull** sat down and replied to all your Maths Anxiety questions.



If you could ask the media to do one thing to help tackle maths anxiety, what would it be?

Dr Thomas Hunt

This is an interesting one! I think depicting maths use/success by popular TV/film characters would be a start – not forced – and not overly ambitious achievements either – just everyday use and success.

Currently, there are two extremes: either success depicted by so-called nerds/geeks in a clearly-less-than-desirable way, or popular characters demonstrating a dislike of maths.

In addition to that, using news/magazine articles, radio shows, and podcasts to disseminate two key messages would help:

- raising issues associated with maths difficulties, and
- highlighting positive messages about how such issues can be addressed

Bobby Seagull

Trying to spotlight the creative, accessible and relevant aspect of maths rather than just being a niche gift for geniuses. Of course, there are maths geniuses, but the media should make more of a concerted effort to show normal people who are confident using maths skills in everyday situations.

This will help all learners feel that that could be them. More everyday moments could include shopping, playing sport, baking etc.



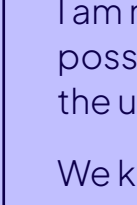
Maths anxiety and general anxiety seem to be strongly related according to research so I'm wondering if maths anxiety might be reflecting a general academic anxiety or is particular to maths?

Dr Thomas Hunt

General anxiety is indeed consistently related to maths anxiety. In many ways this should be expected – if there was no relationship then we might question whether maths anxiety is in fact an “anxiety”.

However, the relationship isn't sufficiently strong enough to question whether the two anxieties are the 'same', e.g. that maths anxiety is actually just general anxiety in the context of maths.

Also, there are enough research findings now to highlight how maths anxiety has specific predictive ability over and above general anxiety, specifically in the context of maths (e.g. engagement and performance).



Isn't it time to move from maths anxiety to maths resilience?

Dr Thomas Hunt

People will have slightly different views on the concepts of anxiety and resilience. I think both should be spoken about.

In the context of popular discussion and messaging, people are generally familiar with the concept of anxiety – it's a bit more intuitive, captures attention, and acts as a good starting point. Any discussion of maths anxiety, particularly ways to address it, should include reference to resilience.

In fact, for me, resilience should include consideration of anxiety anyway, largely from the perspective of discussing what anxiety really means. A more nuanced view of anxiety brings the discussion round to the concept of appraisal or interpretation of thoughts/responses/feelings, which feeds into discussion of resilience.

Part of the issue, in my opinion, is that definitions of resilience can vary probably a little more than definitions of anxiety, so some work is needed on that. One thing to note is that there is more to maths anxiety than resilience, and there is more to resilience than anxiety. Ultimately, both anxiety and resilience should be acknowledged and discussed.

Bobby Seagull

I think both can be done at the same time. Maths should be about building confidence and resilience, not just reducing fear.

However maths anxiety as a term, while perhaps not fully understood, does have wider recognition. And in that sense, more work should still be done acknowledging its existence and how to help learners overcome it.



Is there a difference in maths anxiety between students in private/grammar schools and state comprehensives?

Dr Thomas Hunt

I am not aware of any research that looks at this. I suppose there are several possibilities for why this question arose, perhaps getting at what some of the underlying causes of maths anxiety are.

We know that maths anxiety is associated with factors such as attainment, socio-economic status, sometimes motivation, but also shame and fear of failure. These are just some of the possible variables that spring to mind as being relevant if such school comparisons were being made.

Bobby Seagull

While being someone that teaches in the state sector, I have been educated in both state and independent as a student (winning a sixth form scholarship to Eton College).

Maths anxiety does generally transcend school type as it is about experiences, culture and attitudes, not just the institution you attend. However state school students might be more likely to face additional obstacles (such as resources, teacher confidence) and this might amplify the anxiety.

However some leading state schools and independent schools may create environments where students are expected to get the top grades and this pressure might lead to a different expression of maths anxiety (fear of failure) rather than avoidance.



Do you use mini whiteboards to avoid the putting up of hands and the way that can intimidate learners?

Bobby Seagull

This is definitely something I would endorse. Using mini whiteboards or individual response methods like this reduces the public “spotlight fear”. This allows students to show their work without fear of being wrong in front of peers.

This can help build an inclusive culture where mistakes are visible to the teacher, but they are in a safe place. The teacher can then use common errors spotted as learning moments rather than shame.



Can resilience be taught to students to help with anxiety and the fear of failing?

Dr Thomas Hunt

I believe resilience can be taught to students to help with anxiety and the fear of failing, although it also depends on

- what is meant by resilience, and
- what the underlying causes of an individual's maths anxiety are.

Some people take quite a broad view of what resilience is, encompassing attitudes towards maths. Others take a more specific view, focusing on the concepts of bouncing back from great difficulty/stress or the idea of persisting when things are tough.

All of these ways of conceptualising resilience are likely to be important but, as with a focus on anxiety, a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable. One perspective is that reducing anxiety (or reconceptualised as addressing anxiety through understanding, meta-awareness, and reappraisal) can support greater resilience, so tackling maths anxiety initially is likely to be important for the development of greater resilience.

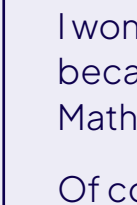
As for fear of failing, again a more nuanced view of this is needed – there are debates around concepts such as “useful worry” and the extent to which motivation – fuelled by at least some fear of failure – could work in tandem with mental and physiological arousal to support better performance.

Fear of failure would need to be considered more carefully in the context of factors such as what that fear is based on and indeed whether failure is conceptualised in the context of getting a maths problem “wrong” or failing a whole maths test. Also fear of failure is likely to be impacted by perceived social norms and various external – as well as internal – pressures, so whilst improving resilience is likely to help alleviate extreme fear of failure, there may be other factors to consider as well.

Bobby Seagull

Absolutely, it is all about normalising mistakes in a safe environment. I often tell students that we all make mistakes from time to time, it's about trying to learn from them. This resilience can be built by having regular low-stakes practice in class, so the cost of being wrong is perceived as low.

The classroom culture is about praising effort and collaboration, not just correctness. Ultimately resilience can't be built overnight, but it is small habits and teachers consistently modelling (how they might have struggles and overcome them) that leads to a better learner mindset.



Does the Jo Boaler study reflect how important beliefs are? Both for learner and teacher. If the teacher or parent doesn't believe the learner can learn then it is self fulfilling. We need to believe before we can improve and achieve anything. Goes for the teachers too.

Bobby Seagull

Belief matters hugely. We live in a country where many students leave school believing they are not a maths person, and this belief hampers progress.

The teacher's belief is important. If they view ability as fixed (saying things like “some people just get maths”), this can send the wrong message.

The Jo Boaler paradigm about mindset and beliefs is core. Both the learned and teacher beliefs can feed into maths anxiety or maths resilience.



From my work I've seen that maths anxiety changes through secondary school, but maths confidence doesn't change as much. What practical steps/techniques can teachers use to address maths anxiety and maths confidence in students at the same time?

Dr Thomas Hunt

This is a tough one to answer as there are so many things that can be done to address maths anxiety and improve confidence.

Whilst techniques to reduce anxiety (sometimes have a knock-on effect in terms of improving confidence (and vice-versa in terms of improving confidence might sometimes reduce anxiety), sometimes it is necessary to target each thing separately.

Learners can have varying profiles in terms of different combinations of key psychological characteristics, e.g. low, medium, or high maths anxiety, general anxiety, test anxiety, confidence, motivation, etc, so it is important to adapt approaches accordingly.

Successful interventions to improve confidence often involve effective peer collaboration, effective feedback, working through errors, gamification, etc. Successful interventions to tackle maths anxiety tend to include a combination of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural tactics.

See Pearson's Guide to Tackling Mathematics Anxiety and my recent co-authored book Maths Anxiety: Solving the Equation for more on this!

Bobby Seagull:

Some ideas I've tried are:

- **Low-stakes regular exposure:** these are small frequent tasks so students feel like they are learning rather than performing.

- **Reflection routines:** getting students to think about “how did they feel” after they got stuck and “what did they do when stuck?” to get them to think about their meta-cognition.

- **Explicit mindset language:** promoted words such as “yet”, “growth”, “process” rather than “gifted” or “smart” labels.

- **Teacher modelling:** I share when I've found maths hard and show how I worked through it.

I'm a full time maths teacher and part-time student. I'm just finishing a doctorate about maths anxiety and teacher perception. Are you aware of any research in this area?

Dr Thomas Hunt

There is research into maths anxiety in teachers ([see the Pearson Guide to Tackling Maths Anxiety](#)), but there is not much research on teachers' perspectives on maths anxiety, so I will look forward to hearing what you find in your research.

I am dealing with some refusers saying it doesn't matter because I can resit at college. But I know that they do not get the same amount of time per week on the subject, and finding a way to change that mindset is something else on top of the anxiety.

Dr Thomas Hunt

This is quite common and I find such an attitude often stems from a lack of motivation, so perhaps some work on this might help.

Understanding the student's personal aims, e.g. around the type of job or further study they would like to pursue, can be used to reframe maths work in that context. Sometimes such an attitude can be a coping mechanism to relieve some of the pressure and it is hard to know the extent to which the student themselves really believes what they are saying.

That said, it can also be indicative of a wider attitude towards learning and evaluation, which requires a more holistic approach to address.

Bobby Seagull

I would emphasise the passing and being confident matters beyond the certificate. It's about showing yourself that you can put your mind to something difficult and get through it. Of course they can resit, but I tell students that wouldn't it be better to walk out of the course already confident in their maths and be ready for the next stage.

Perhaps consider peer-group mentoring and sometimes refusers benefit from seeing peers who succeeded.