Do highly mathematics-anxious students fear mathematics or the thought of attempting a mathematics question?

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Commonly heard phrases in any mathematics class to students are ‘use your brain’ or ‘just have a go, write something’. What if the brain reacts to hinder the mathematical thought process before it even has a chance to start? Do students fear the thought of attempting a mathematics question more than the actual mathematics itself? It could be this fear that prevents students from obtaining a better grade in tests rather than lack of mathematical knowledge.

The work of Beilock and Lyons (2011) investigated how the brain reacted to knowing a mathematical rather than word question was to be asked. The highly mathematics-anxious students who did not activate the associated part of the brain proceeded to answer only 68% of the questions correctly. So the answer to helping highly mathematics-anxious students may be utilising this control of fear rather than extra exercises. This presentation will discuss simple activities that may aid our weaker students to improve their score, recognise and control their fear and decrease mathematical anxiety.