

Mathephobia

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There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears has not reached perfection in love.

—1 John 4:18 HCSB

I was having problems. It was my junior year in high school, and I couldn't sleep. I was gaining weight, my grades were slipping, I felt I was slowly going insane. I thought there might be something seriously wrong with me, so my father took me to his physician. After getting a complete physical and donating most of my blood for lab tests, the evidence was conclusive—there was nothing wrong with me.

It wasn't a physical problem, we decided, it must be a psychological problem. I saw a Christian counselor, and he had me fill out psychological evaluations. They indicated that I should be a bus driver or a minister—interesting choices.

The counselor and I talked a lot, but mostly we talked about my dread of math. I hated math. I loathed math. I wished math would disappear from the face of the earth. I just knew that Algebra II, the class I was taking that year, was going to be the end of my life. I was, in fact, so frustrated with math, my anxiety had manifested itself in physical ways. That's why I couldn't sleep and was depressed, which

caused me to eat more. Grades in my other classes were slipping because I spent most of the day either dreading or recovering from math.

We looked at how I'd responded to math for my entire life. Two years before, I'd actually had a nervous breakdown in my geometry class. The teacher had given a test on the very first day of class, and I didn't know anything about geometry. I freaked out.

Yes, math literally made me sick. The psychologist ultimately determined that I had—and I kid you not—mathephobia, or the fear of math.

I ended up failing math that year—the only class I've ever failed. I felt so defeated, like such a loser. The next year I had to retake Algebra II but with a different teacher. I was surprised, though, that I did better the second time around. Not only better, but a lot better. I ended up with an "A" average.

Why the big change? In retrospect, it's easy to see what changed. I no longer had the fear of failing—I'd already done it. For so long, though, I'd striven to be perfect. I had this warped perception that if I were perfect, people would like me more, my family would love me more, and maybe—just maybe—God would love me more. So when I faced something that I wasn't perfect at, I physically and mentally shut down. But when I failed, I somehow learned that I would never be perfect, that I don't have to be perfect at something from the minute I start studying it. Instead, I became open to learning and growing.

I did get better at math as time went on, and I allowed myself to grow no matter how slow the process. I also learned that God loves me, no matter how imperfect I am. Now, I no longer fear math, or fear that I'll never be the Christian I want to be. I realize now, that's a slow process too. I still get frustrated, over both math and my Christian walk, but tackling either no longer makes me anxious. In my college statistics classes I, in fact, made A's. I've gone on to become a social scientist working in the areas of communibiology and behavioral genetics, both of which rely heavily on the ability to use statistics. I've actually taught biostatistics to medical students and residents and

statistical research methods to undergraduates. I'm even in the process of writing a statistics research methods book.

Who would have thought that could happen?
Apparently, only God.