

Reframing and Neutralizing Negative Thoughts

(Notes from *Managing the Mean Math Blues* by Cheryl Ooten & Kathy Moore)



In Chapters 10 and 11 of *Managing the Mean Math Blues*, Ooten and Moore discuss the effects of our thoughts about math on our emotions, our body sensations, and ultimately, our behaviors. Many of these thoughts come from what words we choose to express a belief: “I’m going to fail this quiz,” “I can’t get factoring,” “Why do I have to do this – I hate it,” “I hope I don’t blank out again.” These are not helpful; so how do we counter these thoughts?

Add the word “yet” to your statement. This is probably the first and easiest step to take. If you catch yourself (or someone else!) making a negative statement about getting a math skill, add “yet” to the end. For example, “I can’t get factoring – *yet*,” can reflect your current frustration, but it also adds the intent that you *will* get there.

Replace any “should,” “must,” or “have to” with “choose to,” “want to,” or “will.” The earlier phrases all reflect that you’d really rather not, and that can lead to rebellious feelings. Even the struggle with “I should do my homework” can be made a bit lighter by deciding “I *choose to* do my homework.”

Note the feelings that created your thought. Feelings are not the same as beliefs. By noting that negative thoughts reflect negative feelings, identify the feeling and deal with that. “I’ll never finish this assignment” is really “I feel like I’ll never finish...” and can emerge from feelings of frustration and fatigue. Some of these are even subconscious reactions from previous math experiences. Since that thought will only bring further discouragement, note it and take brief break for a quick snack. It may help you clear your mind and give you some energy.

Crystal Ball Thinking = Self-prediction. Deciding how the future will be: “I’m gonna fail that test tomorrow,” “I’ll never get math,” tells your self-conscious what the future will be. *Says who??* All this does is set your emotions and your behaviors to achieve that future. Reframe to something realistic: “I’m going to focus on what I can do well, and do my best on the rest of it.” That’s the behavior you want in the future!

Avoid overgeneralizing or absolutes. Some students head into their math tests focused on perhaps one area that gave them some difficulty, and think they are going to fail the test because of it. Or they leave a test focused on one problem that gave them trouble. Instead, head into the test reminding yourself of all the topics you *do* know, and notice before you leave how many problems you completed.

The research is now clear: Stress and anxiety reduce our working memory capacity! So reframing and neutralizing negative thoughts can help you conserve the energy you might be exerting in tight muscles, rapid breathing, or headaches so you can use that energy for thinking and remembering. By choosing to change your thoughts, you can change your behavior and get the results you want!

