
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Addiction to war



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam. In this programme, we'll be hearing about the extraordinary life of a well-known BBC journalist, Fergal Keane. As a BBC war correspondent, Fergal witnessed some of the most violent events in recent history. Fergal's reporting helped his television audiences make sense of the horrors of war, but underneath there were more personal reasons attracting him to the frontline.

Neil

Despite the danger, Fergal found himself going back again and again to report from war zones. It gave him something he couldn't get anywhere else – a massive rush of adrenaline, and Fergal started to worry that he was becoming addicted to war.

Sam

In his new book, 'The Madness: A Memoir of War, Fear and PTSD', Fergal discusses living with PTSD, or **post-traumatic stress disorder**, a type of psychological suffering that results from witnessing extreme violence. We'll hear about some key events in Fergal's life, and, as usual, we'll be learning some new vocabulary as well.

Neil

But first, I have a question for you, Sam. The term, PTSD, is quite new, but descriptions of the mental suffering of war go back to ancient times. Something similar to PTSD is mentioned in Viking sagas and in stories about both World Wars. So, what was the name of the PTSD-like condition suffered by many soldiers during the First World War? Was it:

- a) nostalgia?
- b) shell shock? or,
- c) combat stress?

Sam

I think the answer is shell shock.

Neil

OK, Sam, I'll reveal the answer later in the programme. Fergal Keane, who was born in Ireland, had seen violence ever since the early days of his career covering the fighting in Belfast. He had already reported from wars all over the world when, in 1994, he was sent to cover the civil war in Rwanda. But what Fergal saw there shocked him like nothing before, as he told Mobeen Azhar, presenter of BBC World Service programme, Lives Less Ordinary.

Fergal Keane

...and I began to have **nightmares** of Rwanda. And of course, at that stage, you know, it was obvious that I was traumatised but, again, did I go to a **psychiatrist**? No, I didn't. I kept doing the job.

Mobeen Azhar

Did you turn to other things?

Fergal Keane

Booze.

Mobeen Azhar

Booze. I mean, how much booze are we talking?

Fergal Keane

You know, the truth is, I was an alcoholic long before I got to Rwanda. But I was in the kind of functioning alcoholic - what they call, you know, managing it stage of the of the disease.

Sam

When Fergal returned home from Rwanda, he started having **nightmares** – upsetting and frightening dreams. It was obvious he was traumatised from the violence he had seen, but still Fergal didn't go to a **psychiatrist** – a medical doctor who specialises in treating mental illness.

Neil

Instead, Fergal turned to **booze** – an informal name for alcohol. Fergal had been addicted to alcohol before he arrived in Rwanda, but now he had another addiction to cope with – the need to keep returning to war. Fergal knew it wasn't healthy, but he couldn't stop.

Sam

Around the year 2001, it seemed that war was everywhere, and Fergal kept on reporting – in Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon. But the nightmares didn't stop, and his mental health got worse and worse. Here Fergal takes up the story with BBC World Service programme, Lives Less Ordinary.

Fergal Keane

I reach a point where I can't carry that anymore, and it's not dramatic, it's a slow, steady erosion... and that ends with a **breakdown**, and admission to hospital, and this time diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and fulfilling the kind of essential criteria as the psychiatrist saw it of hypervigilance, nightmares, flashbacks... more nightmares than flashbacks... and the sense of being under threat, and anger.

Mobeen Azhar

How did you feel?

Fergal Keane

Relief, I think. You know, there's a name to this.

Mobeen Azhar

You might expect Fergal to **call it a day** at this point, but that's not how addiction works. He just kept getting pulled back in.

Neil

Fergal had a nervous **breakdown** – a period of acute mental illness leaving him unable to cope with life. After the terrible things Fergal had witnessed, you might expect him to **call it a day** – a phrase meaning to decide to stop what you are doing. But Fergal's addictions made that impossible.

Sam

After his diagnosis of PTSD, he got support and was finally able to stay away from booze and war.

Neil

OK, it's time to reveal the answer to my question. I asked about the name of the PTSD-like condition suffered by soldiers during World War One.

Sam

And I said it was shell shock.

Neil

Which was the correct answer. Right, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned from the extraordinary life of Fergal Keane, the war correspondent who suffered PTSD or **post-traumatic stress disorder** – a mental illness experienced after violent or shocking events.

Sam

A **nightmare** is an upsetting and frightening dream.

Neil

A **psychiatrist** is a type of doctor who specialises in mental illness.

Sam

Booze is slang for alcohol.

Neil

A **breakdown**, is an acute period of psychological illness leaving you unable to cope with life.

Sam

And finally, the phrase **call it a day** means to stop what you are doing because you no longer want to. Once again, our six minutes are up. Goodbye for now!

Neil

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

mental condition in which someone suffers psychological damage after a very violent or shocking experience such as war

nightmare

upsetting and frightening dream

psychiatrist

medical doctor who specialises in mental illness

booze

(informal) alcohol

breakdown

period of acute mental illness which leaves you unable to cope with life

call it a day

decide to stop what you are doing because you do not want to do it any more