
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Sounds that make you want to scream



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil

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

Phil

And I'm Phil.

Neil

Ugh! What's that awful noise, Phil?!

Phil

Oh sorry, Neil, I was, er... biting my nails. I know, it's a bad habit.

Neil

Urgh! It sounds terrible!

Phil

Sorry, Neil. Actually, it's not only you who finds certain sounds irritating, unpleasant, or even unbearable. Whether it's someone biting their nails, rustling a crisp bag, or scraping a knife on a dinner plate, some everyday sounds have the power to make us angry or upset.

Neil

There's even a name for it: 'misophonia', also known as 'sound rage', and it's more common than you might think. According to some estimates, one person in five is

affected emotionally by the coughing, slurping, sneezing and snorting sounds made by the people around them.

Phil

In this programme, we'll be finding out more about the medical condition misophonia, and, as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well.

Neil

But first, I have a question for you, Phil. According to a recent survey by the American journal, Medical News, which of the following did their readers find the most unpleasant sound?

Is it:

- a) bicycle brakes squeaking?
- b) nails scraping a blackboard? or,
- c) a baby crying?

Phil

Hmm, I'll guess it was squeaky bicycle brakes. I really hate that!

Neil

OK. Phil, we'll find out the answer later in the programme. For people suffering from misophonia, the specific sounds which cause them to become emotionally upset, also known as **triggers**, often involve food and eating. Just sitting down for dinner with their family can feel like torture.

Phil

Olana Tansley-Hancock is a British clinical researcher who also suffers from misophonia. Here she explains some of her triggers to BBC World Service programme, The Food Chain:

Olana Tansley-Hancock

Just any kind of inescapable, repetitive noise will potentially cause a misophonic-type response in me, that **fight-or-flight** and... And yeah, it's that immediate, uncontrollable reaction that you get to the sound that is the most hard to explain

and unusual I think, cos' in modern day you don't really get many instances where you get a fight-or-flight response - it's not like we're frequently chased down by wild animals - and then to feel those from pretty **innocuous** everyday sounds is the thing that **takes its toll**.

Neil

Certain sounds trigger a **fight-or-flight** response in Olana. **Fight-or-flight** refers to the way the human body responds to stressful or dangerous situations, either by physically running away, or staying to deal with the threat.

Phil

Normally, these would be life-threatening dangers, things like a fire or an attacking wild animal, but for misophonia sufferers even **innocuous**, or completely harmless, sounds create problems.

Neil

That's right. Olana, for example, gets disturbed by helicopters flying in the sky, and the fact that other people don't seem too bothered also **takes its toll**, a phrase meaning causes suffering or pain.

Phil

So what does it feel like to actually experience this kind of stress in everyday life? Here's Olana again, explaining her feelings to Ruth Alexander, presenter of BBC World Service programme, The Food Chain:

Olana Tansley-Hancock

It's not the same feeling, but it's the same response in terms of the immediacy and inability to control it as when someone tells you that someone close to us has **passed away**... that feeling of utter, sudden reaction. You can't control it, and then it lingers and carries on for you, that immediate emotional response.

Ruth Alexander

Almost like a **shock to the system**.

Olana Tansley-Hancock

Yeah.

Neil

Olana describes her misophonia as an uncontrollable and sudden emotional reaction, as if finding out that a loved one has **passed away**. **Passed away** is a polite, euphemistic way of saying 'died'. She also describes it as **a shock to the system** - a sudden and unpleasant change.

Phil

Fortunately, misophonia sufferers have developed some tricks to help. Playing background music can disguise the sound of people sipping and slurping their food; and clearly, honestly explaining what the condition is also helps people sympathise and understand.

Neil

But, of course, some sounds simply *are* disturbing – for example you biting your nails, B!

Phil

Okay, okay, I said I was sorry... Maybe it's time to reveal the answer to your question, Neil, before you get more upset! You asked me which sound was voted the most irritating for readers of the journal, Medical News.

Neil

Right. And you guessed it was bicycle brakes squeaking, which was... the wrong answer, I'm afraid, B. In fact, nails scraping a blackboard was voted the most distressing noise. Right, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned from this programme on misophonia, starting with **trigger**, something that causes people to feel emotional distress or fear.

Phil

Fight-or-flight refers to the natural human response to a threatening situation of either running away, or staying to face the danger.

Neil

The adjective **innocuous** means completely harmless.

Phil

If something **takes its toll**, it causes suffering, damage, or death.

Neil

Passed away is a polite way of saying died.

Phil

And finally, the phrase **a shock to the system** means a sudden and unpleasant change. Once again, our six minutes are up! Join us again next time for more trending topics and useful vocabulary, here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Neil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

trigger

something that causes people to feel emotional distress or fear, often because they remind the person of a traumatic event in the past

fight-or-flight

natural human response to a stressful or dangerous situation that makes people either run away or stay to face the threat

innocuous

completely harmless

takes its toll

causes suffering, damage, or death

passed away

(polite expression) died

a shock to the system

a sudden and unpleasant change