
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The psychology of greed



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil

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

Beth

And I'm Beth.

Neil

I'm writing my birthday wish list, Beth. Listen: I want a new laptop, a gold Rolex watch and a red sports car.

Beth

Phew, that's quite a lot, Neil! Isn't that a bit greedy?

Neil

So what? Greed is good! We're genetically built to want things that increase our social status – power and material possessions like money, a nice house, a fast car... all that **stuff**!

Beth

Hmm, I'm not so sure, Neil. Remember, greed is also one of the seven deadly sins.

Neil

In this programme, we'll be discussing greed, the desire to accumulate '**stuff**', keep it for yourself, and not share it with others. And, of course, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary too. But first I have a question for you, Beth. You reminded

me of a famous quote by one of history's greatest leaders: *The world has enough for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed*. But who said it? Was it:

- a) The Dalai Lama
- b) Mahatma Gandhi, or
- c) Martin Luther King?

Beth

I think it was Mahatma Gandhi.

Neil

OK, Beth, I'll reveal the correct answer at the end of the programme. At the neurological level, greed is controlled by the reward centre of the brain. Greedy people feel good when they choose the **stuff** they want, and this happens at the unconscious, emotional level of the brain, meaning there's little conscious awareness about how greedy actions might affect others, or be unfair.

Beth

But what does this look like in real life? That's what University of California psychologist, Professor Paul Piff, investigated using the classic family boardgame, Monopoly. The game was rigged to give one 'rich' player an advantage by letting them roll two dice instead of one and collecting twice as much money as the 'poor' player when passing Go.

Neil

So, what happened when Professor Piff asked the 'rich' players why they had, inevitably, won the fixed game? Listen to the answer he gave to BBC Radio 4 programme, Seven Deadly Psychologies:

Professor Paul Piff

...they **took credit** for their wins. They talked about how they'd controlled their own outcomes, they talked about how it was the decisions they had made that had led to their being ultimately victorious, and not that **flip of a coin** that randomly got them into that position of privilege in the first place. Now, I don't know that this is a perfect model for how privilege, success or wealth operates in everyday

life... Some people indeed have worked themselves up **by their own bootstraps** and get what they have because they worked hard...

Beth

Interestingly, the rich players **took credit for** winning. If you **take credit for** something, you accept praise and recognition for doing something, whether or not that praise and recognition is deserved.

Neil

In fact, it was the fixed game that determined who would win and lose, not anything the players did. Professor Piff uses the expression, **the flip of a coin**, to describe something which is based solely on random chance, like when you flip a coin into the air. Whether it lands on heads or tails is pure luck.

Beth

Yet the winning players claimed they won thanks to their own skill and ability. Here, Professor Piff uses another idiom, to **pull yourself up by your bootstraps**, meaning to improve your situation through your own hard work, without help from anyone else.

Neil

Worryingly, the experiment showed how feeling financially better *off* than others can easily change into feeling better *than* others. And the reason behind these feelings could be what money buys you, especially one thing: space.

Beth

If you're rich you own a big house. At work you have your own spacious private office. You live in your own private bubble. Here's Professor Piff again talking with BBC Radio 4's, Seven Deadly Psychologies:

Professor Paul Piff

People who are **well off** are just more socially independent. They don't need others in their lives as much, and when you don't need others, well, your **empathy** might suffer as a result.

Neil

People who are **well off**, and rich enough to do what they want, rely on other people less. As a result, they may lack **empathy**, the ability to share someone else's feelings by imagining what it would be like to be them.

Beth

Maybe it's not greed itself that's bad, but the things we're greedy for. Being greedy for social justice or a clean environment is good, right? Something to be admired by the world leader in your question, Neil...

Neil

Yes, I asked you who said, *The world has enough for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed*. You said it was Mahatma Gandhi which was... the correct answer, Beth. OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned from this programme, starting with **stuff**, an informal word for material possessions.

Beth

To **take credit for something** means to allow people to believe that something you did deserves praise or recognition.

Neil

The phrase, **a flip of a coin** refers to an action or decision based on luck or random chance.

Beth

If you **pull yourself up by your bootstraps**, you improve your situation through your own efforts, without help from anyone else.

Neil

Someone who is **well off** is rich enough to be able to have most of what they want.

Beth

And finally, **empathy** means experiencing someone else's feelings by putting yourself in their place. Once again, our six minutes are up! Join us again soon for more trending topics and useful vocabulary, here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Neil
Bye!

VOCABULARY

stuff

(informal) material objects and possessions

take credit (for something)

accept praise and recognition given for doing something good, whether or not you deserve it

the flip of a coin

something based on luck or random chance, such as when flipping a coin into the air to see whether it lands heads-side or tails-side up

pull yourself up by your bootstraps

improve your situation through your own efforts, without help from anyone else

well off

rich enough to be able to have most of what you want

empathy

ability to experience someone else's feelings by imagining what it would be like to be in their situation