
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Evolution and anxiety



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

Hello. This is 6 Minute English I'm Rob.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Rob

Do you ever experience **anxiety**, Neil?

Neil

Anxiety?

Rob

Yes, you know, a feeling of being really worried or nervous without any real reason.

Neil

Well not really, but I know for some people it can be quite a serious problem.

Rob

Well anxiety may be a result of **natural selection**.

Neil

Natural selection? You mean, the principle behind evolution?

Rob

Yes. The idea that life on this planet has developed as a result of random changes in biology over many many years.

Neil

So why have **anxiety**, that seems like a negative rather than a positive thing to develop?

Rob

Well, we'll find out more in this programme, but before we do, a quiz. Charles Darwin is famous for describing evolution by **natural selection**. What was the name of the ship he travelled on when he made his discoveries? Was it:

- a) HMS Beagle
- b) HMS Badger, or
- c) HMS Bear?

What do you think, Neil?

Neil

Well I'm pretty sure I know this one, so I'm not going to give away the answer just yet.

Rob

Well, you can let me know at the end of the programme, before I give the answer. Right, Dr Randolph Nesse is a doctor and psychologist. He has written a lot about how evolution has an impact on our mental condition, particularly **anxiety**. Recently he spoke on BBC Radio 4's 'Start the Week' programme about this topic. Listen out for the answer to this question. How long did he treat patients at the University of Michigan for?

Dr Randolph Nesse

Natural selection has **shaped** all organisms to have special states **to cope with** certain kinds of circumstances. I treated patients with **anxiety** disorders for 40 years at the University of Michigan. It was only half way through that I started realising that **anxiety** is there for a good reason.

Rob

So Neil, how long did he treat patients for at the University of Michigan?

Neil

He says that he did that for 40 years, but it was only after about 20 years or so that he realised that we suffer from **anxiety** for a good reason.

Rob

We'll find out that reason shortly but first he said that **natural selection** has **shaped** all organisms. This means that we are the result of **natural selection**. It has made us what we are.

Neil

And it has made us able **to cope with** different situations. **To cope with** means being able to deal with, being able to manage a difficult situation.

Rob

And **anxiety**, if it's not too great, is a way of dealing with particular situations. Let's hear from Dr Nesse again.

Dr Randolph Nesse

Natural selection has shaped all organisms to have special states to cope with certain kinds of circumstances. I treated patients with anxiety disorders for 40 years at the University of

Michigan. It was only half way through that I started realising that anxiety is there for a good reason.

Rob

So why is **anxiety** a necessary thing, why is it something that, within reason, is not a bad emotion. Here's Dr Nesse talking about his patients who suffer from too much **anxiety**.

Dr Randolph Nesse

What you're having is a normal kind of emergency response which is great in **life-threatening** situations but for you it's a false alarm like a smoke detector **going off** when you burn the toast. And after that many of my patients said – 'Oh, that makes perfect sense, I think I won't need your help after all, doctor.

Rob

So what is **anxiety**?

Neil

Well, it's your body reacting to danger, like an emergency response, a warning. In really dangerous situations, which could harm you or even kill you, which Dr Nesse describes as **life-threatening** situations, it's a useful response to warn you to take action or to prepare for action.

Rob

But some people experience **anxiety** when there is no real danger. It's a false alarm, like when you burn the toast and the smoke detector alarm starts or as he says, **goes off**! And he says that some patients can feel less worried after that, when they realise **anxiety** is a natural thing. Let's hear from Dr Nesse again.

Dr Randolph Nesse

What you're having is a normal kind of emergency response which is great in life-threatening situations but for you it's a false alarm like a smoke detector going off when you burn the toast. And after that many of my patients said – 'Oh, that makes perfect sense, I think I won't need your help after all, doctor.

Rob

Time now to review today's vocabulary, but first, let's have the answer to the quiz question. What was the name of the ship Charles Darwin travelled on when he made his discoveries about evolution? Was it:

- a) HMS Beagle
- b) HMS Badger, or
- c) HMS Bear?

What do you think, Neil?

Neil

Well, I'm pretty sure it's HMS Beagle.

Rob

Well, you are right. Charles Darwin travelled on HMS Beagle. Congratulations if you also knew that. Now, on with today's vocabulary. We were talking about **anxiety**, a feeling of being worried or scared, a feeling that something isn't quite right.

Neil

Dr Nesse suggests that **anxiety** is a result of **natural selection**. This is the principle of evolution whereby random changes in the biology of a living thing can make it more likely to survive in a particular environment..

Rob

These changes **shape** the living thing. They make it what it is. They help it **to cope with** different situations. Which means that they help it manage or deal with those situations.

Neil

A **life-threatening** situation is a very dangerous situation which could cause serious injury or even death.

Rob

And finally there was the phrasal verb **to go off**. For example, if an alarm **goes off**, it means that it starts making a loud noise as a warning. Right, before any alarms start **to go off** here, we need to wrap up. That's all from us today, do join us next time. Until then, you can find us online, on social media and on our app. Look out for [bbclearningenglish](https://www.bbc.com/learningenglish). Bye for now.

Neil

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

anxiety

a feeling of worry and fear

natural selection

a principle of evolution when random changes in an organism's biology may lead it to being more successful in its environment

to shape

to have an important impact on the way something develops

to cope with

to manage a difficult situation

life-threatening

possibly causing death

to go off (talking about an alarm)

starts making its warning noise