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6 Minute English

Is loneliness in our genes?



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NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sophie

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Sophie...

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Sophie

How was your weekend, Neil?

Neil

Well, not great – I hadn't got anything planned, so I didn't see anyone for two days. And to be honest, I felt very lonely! There was a real physical feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Sophie

Poor Neil! You do sound really **down in the dumps**, and that means unhappy! Well, the subject of today's show is loneliness. And **loneliness** is sometimes described as a social pain – a pain that tells us that we're **isolated** – or lacking contact with others – which motivates us to seek out companionship.

Neil

I'd no idea that feeling lonely had a biological explanation! How does being sociable help us, as a species, then, Sophie?

Sophie

It's all about **cooperation** – or working together to get something done – for example, finding food.

Neil

Well, I suppose I cooperated with the pizza delivery guy for a shared outcome.

Sophie

You paid him and he gave you the pizza?

Neil

Exactly. But it wasn't a socially enriching experience. That's the bad thing about London – you can feel lonely, even surrounded with people. It isn't easy to meet people you really like – so often you might as well just on your own.

Sophie

Good point. And I have a question about cities and living alone, Neil, because it's on the rise. Which country has the highest proportion of people living on their own? Is it ...

a) the US?

b) Japan?

Or c) Sweden?

Neil

Well, I'm going to guess b) Japan.

Sophie

OK, we'll see if you got that right later on in the show. So, getting back to loneliness – the idea is that because it makes us feel bad, it motivates us to go out and meet people. Some people are more likely to feel lonely than others because our genes play a role in this tendency.

Neil

I wonder if I inherited loneliness genes.

Sophie

I don't know, Neil, but while in some situations being lonely may be a good thing, because it encourages you to be sociable, in other situations it may be useful to **tolerate** – or put up with – loneliness. Let's listen to Professor Dorret Boomsma at the Vrije University in Amsterdam talking about this.

INSERT**Professor Dorret Boomsma, Department of Biological Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam**

So the intriguing question is why do genes that influence loneliness still exist? And one explanation is that probably they do not only have negative effects. In some situations it is an advantage to be able to tolerate high levels of loneliness and that is why the genes are maintained in the population.

Sophie

So, inheriting genes for loneliness might not be a bad thing. Why's that, Neil?

Neil

Because it means you can tolerate being alone for a long time without feeling bad.

Sophie

Well, that's an **intriguing** – or very interesting – idea. But it shows that you probably don't have those genes, Neil, because you did feel bad at the weekend.

Neil

That's true. And actually, that was despite spending a long time on Facebook, and that's a form of social contact. But does all the tweeting, messaging, and chatting online that we do make us lonelier, because we're getting out less and meeting fewer people? Or do virtual connections stop us from feeling lonely?

Sophie

Those are also intriguing questions. Let's listen to Professor Eric Klinenberg sociologist at New York University and author of a book about living alone. He talks about this.

INSERT**Eric Klinenberg, sociologist at New York University and author**

We just don't have great research showing that we are significantly more lonely or isolated today than we were ten or twenty or thirty years ago, which means critics who say that Facebook or the internet or whatever device you carry with you, is making you lonelier and more miserable - they just don't have that much evidence to back it up.

Neil

So there isn't enough evidence to **back up** – or support – the claim that social media is making us feel lonelier.

Sophie

No, there isn't. OK, now before I give you the answer to today's quiz question, Neil, did you know that loneliness is **contagious**?

Neil

You mean you can catch it from somebody like a cold?

Sophie

Yes. There are environmental factors involved in loneliness too. For example, if somebody you talk to every day is always unfriendly towards you, this makes you statistically more likely to be negative in your interactions with somebody else.

Neil

Well, let's try and stay friendly towards each other, then, Sophie. You can start by telling me whether I got today's quiz question right!

Sophie

OK. I asked: which country has the highest proportion of people living on their own? Is it ... a) the US, b) Japan or c) Sweden?

Neil

And I said Japan.

Sophie

This is the wrong answer, I'm afraid. It's actually c) Sweden. Nearly half of all Swedish households are **single-occupancy** – or for one person. Living alone in Sweden is arguably the norm because it's so easy – there are many affordable single-occupancy apartments and young Swedes can expect to move into their own apartment once they graduate high-school.

Neil

OK, now let's hear the words we learned today again, Sophie.

Sophie

Yes, OK.

They are:

down in the dumps

loneliness

isolated

cooperation

tolerate

intriguing

back up

contagious

single occupancy

Neil

Well, that's the end of this edition of 6 Minute English. Join us again soon! Meanwhile, visit our website: bbclearningenglish.com, where you'll find guides to grammar, exercises, videos and articles to read and improve your English.

Both

Bye!

Vocabulary

down in the dumps

unhappy

loneliness

an unpleasant feeling that tells us that we're lacking contact with others, which motivates us to seek out companionship

isolated

lacking contact with others

cooperation

working together to get something done

tolerate

put up with

intriguing

very interesting

back up

support

contagious

get something (e.g. a cold, or a lonely feeling) from someone else who has it

single occupancy

a room or apartment for one person