Dan
Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English – the programme where we bring you an interesting topic and six items of vocabulary. I’m Dan. And today we’re talking about...

Catherine
Sighing. I’m Catherine.

Dan
Now – was that a real sigh – or just one to demonstrate the meaning?

Catherine
That one was just for educational purposes, of course, Dan.

Dan
We’ll be looking at why we sigh, and learn how sighing keeps us alive!

Catherine
Yes, very interesting. And it’s not just humans that sigh, is it, Dan?

Dan
Indeed, most mammals sigh. And that brings me to today’s question. How many times does a mouse sigh in an hour, on average? Is it?

   a) Twice
   b) 10 times
   c) 40 times

Catherine
I’m going to say the poor little thing will sigh about 40 times an hour

Dan
OK. Let’s find out if you’re right later on in the programme. Now, what is a sigh, exactly?
Catherine
Let’s hear from Dr Lynne Barker, a cognitive neuroscientist from Sheffield Hallam University in the UK.

Dr Lynne Barker, Cognitive Neuroscientist, Sheffield Hallam University
It’s a typically cardio-respiratory kind of resetting mechanism, and most mammals will engage in sighing of some kind. Because people who don’t sigh would eventually die. It is a survival mechanism.

Catherine
So sighing keeps us alive.

Dan
Dr Barker called it a survival mechanism. To survive means to continue living, especially in difficult circumstances. A mechanism, here, means a system of behaviour.

Catherine
So, a survival mechanism is something the body does automatically in order to survive. But, Dan, why is sighing a survival mechanism?

Dan
It’s because sighing can reset the lungs. To reset is to return something to its original settings. We often use this verb when talking about technology. You can reset a computer or a phone.

Catherine
OK, that’s fine. But how does a sigh reset the lungs?

Dan
Well, scientists from UCLA, that’s the University of California, Los Angeles, found that a sigh is a special kind of very deep breath that keeps the tiny sacs of air in our lungs, called alveoli, working properly.

Catherine
And without sighing, these alveoli would collapse and we would die. We need the alveoli to transfer oxygen from our lungs to our blood.

Dan
Thankfully, we don’t have to think about this need to reset our lungs. Sighing is in fact a reflex.

Catherine
Boo!
Dan
Argh!

Catherine
There – you jumped! And that was a fabulous reflex, Dan! It’s something our bodies do without thinking, something you do unconsciously or automatically.

Dan
…I meant …argh….like a man. Thank you for that, Catherine.

Catherine
You’re welcome.

Dan
Do you sigh a lot?

Catherine
Well, I sigh when I’m tired, and I sigh when I’m relieved. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Dan
To breathe a sigh of relief – that’s a great expression. It means what you think it means – to sigh when you feel good that something bad has not happened – but it’s often used metaphorically. It relates more to the feeling of relief than the act of sighing.

Catherine
That’s right. Now, I breathed a sigh of relief when I found my mobile phone the other day. I thought I’d lost it. It was new. I was so pleased when I found it! What about you, Dan?

Dan
I tend to sigh to show frustration. And sometimes resignation.

Catherine
Now, frustration is what we feel when things aren’t going well, when things are annoying us and they don’t work. When things are frustrating.

Dan
And resignation is what we feel when we finally accept that something bad has happened, that we can’t change. We feel resigned to something.

Catherine
So, relief, resignation, frustration, resetting our lungs. It sounds like we humans never stop sighing!

Dan
Well, actually, we humans sigh on average 12 times an hour. But what about… mice?
Catherine
Well, I said, I reckon they sigh about 40 times an hour.

Dan
Well, in fact, it is 40 times an hour. The hearts of mice beat faster – so they need to regulate their lungs more than humans.

Catherine
Let's review today's vocabulary.

Dan
We had the phrase **survival mechanism**. Something we do without thinking that keeps us alive.

Catherine
We often use this phrase, and the related phrase defence mechanism, when talking about what people do to cope with difficulties in life.

Dan
Next, we had **reset**. You can reset a computer, or a machine – to make it work again. This usually means switching it off and on again.

Catherine
And you can reset a password – this is a little bit different. It means to set – or choose - a new password.

Dan
We also had the word **reflex**. This is a physical action or reaction that you can’t control. For example… Catherine?

Catherine
Yes?

Dan
There, you closed your eyes. Another **reflex**.

Catherine
And we had **to breathe a sigh to relief**. Which means to feel better after something bad doesn’t happen. I breathed a sigh of relief when my friend recovered from her illness.

Dan
But we sigh for other reasons too. Two useful sighing words were: **frustration** and **resignation**.
Catherine

**Frustration** is the state of being **frustrated**. We can say something is **frustrating**. It’s frustrating when my boss doesn’t listen to me.

Dan

But let’s say you move beyond feeling **frustrated** and start feeling **resigned**.

Catherine

Yeah, and that would be when I finally accept my boss will never listen to me. And that’s when I’ll **resign**!

Dan

To **resign** also means to voluntarily leave a job! Please, Catherine, tell me that’s just another vocabulary example?

Catherine

Of course it is, Dan. I love my job! I only ever sigh, what, 12 times an hour?!

Dan

Which is perfectly average. And that’s it for today’s 6 Minute English. Please join us again soon.

Catherine

And we are on social media too. Make sure to find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

Both

Bye!