
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

A quieter world



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

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

Georgina

And I'm Georgina.

Neil

In this programme, we're talking about something that always surrounds us – noise.

Georgina

Yes, whether it's the natural sounds of birdsong, the wind blowing, or man-made noise, like traffic or music – there's always something we can hear.

Neil

Of course, there are sounds that we like to hear and then there are those sounds that really **grate** – annoy or irritate...

Georgina

... like the beeping sound on a reversing lorry or someone drilling a hole in the road.

Neil

Indeed. Soon we'll be looking at the language of noise and hearing about ideas for making the world a quieter place. But let's kick off with a question about the measurement of sound, which is in units called **decibels**. According to a guide by the World Health Organisation, what is considered the highest level we can be safely exposed to for a maximum of eight hours? Is it...

- a) 55 decibels,
- b) 85 decibels, or
- c) 125 decibels?

Georgina

I imagine it's quite low, so I'll go for a) 55 decibels.

Neil

Well, as always, I'll reveal the correct answer later. Now, let's sound out what people know about sound, starting with Julian Treasure, the founder of The Sound Agency. He spoke to the BBC World Service programme, People Fixing the World.

Georgina

He discussed why noise is a form of pollution. And it's bad for our health, but we don't always realise...

Julian Treasure, Founder, The Sound Agency

Sound has powerful effects on us all the time, even though most of the time we're not **conscious** of it because we've kind of got into the habit of **suppressing** our listening. There's so much noise around us in cities that we **get into the habit** of ignoring it. Now that's not a great thing when the noise is having a bad effect on us.

Neil

Julian makes a good point – that sounds affect us all the time, even when we don't realise. We're not **conscious** of it – so we're not aware of it, but it is there. It may be irritating us, but we don't stop to think what it is that's annoying us.

Georgina

As Julian also said, we **get into the habit of** ignoring sounds. When you **get into the habit of** something, you start doing something regularly without even thinking about it.

Neil

And another habit we get into is **suppressing** our listening – so, preventing or stopping ourselves from hearing the noises. But experts have found this isn't good for us. That noise in the background can lead to stress and mental health issues.

Georgina

Yes, we all need some peace and quiet. Of course, there are many techniques for reducing and absorbing noise. For example, trees are grown by motorways to absorb the traffic noise. At a large rock concert, acoustic screens are put up to stop the sound being heard too far away.

Neil

All sound ideas – I mean good ideas. But let's head to the world's noisiest city – Mumbai in India - where **honking** car horns are a big problem.

Georgina

I love the sound of that word **honk** – a short, loud sound – but I don't like the actual noise. The People Fixing the World programme discussed this problem and met a woman who's been working for years to try and reduce noise levels and create quiet zones.

Neil

She's Sumaira Abdul Ali from the Awaaz Foundation, and she explained why honking horns was a hard thing to control...

Sumaira Abdul Ali, the Awaaz Foundation

Honking and noise in general in India is a medium of expression, of sadness, of happiness, of every kind. This is what I was told when I started working, that these are all Western ideas to want to control noise – Indians love noise! And it's about the noise, it's about the colour, it's about the laughter and happiness, we don't want to be like the West – you know, those kind of dull, boring people, who don't **express themselves** the way we do!

Georgina

I like how honking a horn isn't just for road safety – it's almost another language. People **express themselves** – or show how they feel – by sounding their car horn. To control this noise – to be quieter - is considered a Western idea.

Neil

But Sumaira is trying to change drivers' behaviour, and after much effort, even got the police to run a campaign. If noise levels at traffic lights went over 85 decibels, the lights would remain on red for longer!

Georgina

Sounds like a good idea! There's much more about this on the BBC's Fixing the World webpage. So, Neil you just mentioned 85 decibels. Is that the answer to the question you asked earlier?

Neil

Earlier I asked, according to a guide by the World Health Organisation, what is considered the highest level we can be safely exposed to for a maximum of eight hours?

Georgina

I said 55 decibels.

Neil

Ah Well, it is actually 85 decibels, Georgina. Bad luck. The permissible time for safe listening decreases as sound levels increase. So, for example, a sound as high as 100 decibels – the level produced by a subway train – can be safely listened to for only 15 minutes each day.

Georgina

Well, that's good to know. Now, let's recap on some of the vocabulary we've been discussing, starting with **grate** – spelt G-R-A-T-E – it means annoy or irritate.

Neil

When we are **conscious** of something, we are aware of it. And when we **get into the habit of** something, we start doing something regularly, often without even thinking about it.

Georgina

Suppressing describes preventing, stopping or reducing something.

Neil

Honk is the short, loud sound a car horn makes. Like this – honk.

Georgina

I can hear you coming, Neil! Finally, to **express yourself**, means to show how you feel.

Neil

Well, I must express my sadness because we're out of time now. But there are lots more 6 Minute English programmes to enjoy on our website at bbclearningenglish.com.

Georgina

We also have an app that you can download for free from the app stores and where you can download this programme. And of course, we are all over social media.

Neil

Thanks for listening and goodbye.

Georgina

Goodbye.

VOCABULARY

grate

annoy or irritate

conscious

aware of something

get into the habit of (something)

start doing something regularly, often without even thinking about it

suppressing

preventing, stopping or reducing

honk

short, loud sound a car horn makes

express yourself

show how you feel.